BUSINESS

Nvidia says India must upgrade its $1.2B AI investment

≫ Page: 7 ≪

SPORTS

J&K make history, enter final for first time in 67 years

≫ Page: 8 ≪

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SALAR

DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

ساڈھ روزنامہ بنگلور

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M'rashtra ends 5% quota for Muslim in jobs, education

Officials term move procedural, Oppn calls govt anti-minority

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

The Maharashtra government has formally cancelled the five per cent reservation for Muslims in education and government and semi-government jobs, issuing a Government Resolution (GR) after the 2014 ordinance granting the quota lapsed and courts stayed its operation.

The previous Congress-NCP government had introduced a 16 per cent quota for Marathas and a five per cent quota for 50 specified Muslim communities under the Special Backward Category-A (SBC-A) through an ordinance in July 2014. The move raised total reservation in the state from 52 per cent to 68 per cent.

The ordinances were challenged in the Bombay High Court in, citing breach of the 50 per cent ceiling laid down by the Supreme Court. In November 2014, a Division Bench headed by Chief Justice Mohit S Shah stayed the Maratha quota but observed there was sufficient quantifiable data , including the Sachar Committee report and other studies, to support classification of the 50 Muslim communities as socially and educationally backward. However, the ordinance was not enacted into law by December 2014 and lapsed automatically. Despite this, the original GR had not been formally rescinded until now. The new GR cancels all related decisions and circulars, stops issuance of caste and non-creamy layer certificates under SBC-A, and bars admissions or recruitment under the quota. Officials termed the move procedural. Opposition accused the BJP-led government of an "anti-minority" mindset, with Congress leader Naseem Khan calling the decision "extremely wrong" and alleging minority welfare schemes had also been curtailed. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 3

As per the new GR, all previous decisions, circulars, and procedures related to the Muslim quota have now been cancelled *—PTI*

Govt illegally gave plots for Cong offices: K'taka BJP

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

The opposition BJP in Karnataka has strongly criticised the Congress government for allotting several civic amenity sites across the State for the construction of party offices, and alleged that land had been allotted to the Congress at a 'throwaway' price — just five per cent of the guidance value.

Leader of the Opposition in the Council Chalavadi Narayanaswamy on Tuesday had said that the Congress had 'illegally' obtained plots of 31 sites for construction of new party offices

"The government is involved in looting land. The government cannot take land wherever it wants — taluk, zilla, mandal, panchayat and so on. "In Badami, 613 square metres costing Rs 24.52 lakh has been bought for merely Rs 1.22 lakh. In Koppal, instead of Rs 1.31 crore, they have got the land for Rs 6.56 lakh (5%). In Mandya, a land worth Rs 1.45 crore has been bought for Rs 7.28 lakh. In Gauribidanur, land worth Rs 90.8 lakh was purchased for 4.54 lakh," Narayanaswamy said.

The BJP state president B Y Vijayendra, in a post on X, said that the "Congress grabs government land for party offices — another brazen abuse of power." He alleged that while providing land and housing to the poor is the government's responsibility, the Congress administration was instead indulging in self-serving decisions. "Civic Amenity sites worth crores across the state have been allotted to the party at just five per cent of the market value. This is a direct loss to the public exchequer and a betrayal of the people of Karnataka," he alleged. *—PTI*

Biennial polls to 37 Rajya Sabha seats on 16 March

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Election Commission announced on Wednesday that biennial elections for 37 Rajya Sabha seats across ten states will be held on 16 March. Notifications for the polls will be issued on 26 February Seats are falling vacant in Maharashtra (7), Odisha (4), Telangana (2), Tamil Nadu (6), Chhattisgarh (2), West Bengal (5), Assam (3), Haryana (2), Himachal Pradesh (1) and Bihar (5) on 2 and 9 April Polling will take place from 9am to 4pm, with counting from 5pm the same day. Prominent MPs retiring include Sharad Pawar (NCP-SP), Abhishek Singhvi (Congress), Saket Gokhale (TMC), Ramdas Athawale (RPI-A), M Thambidurai (AIADMK) and Tiruchi Siva (DMK). *—PTI*

Community flays 'Yadav Ji Ki Love Story' film

SAMBHAL, 18 FEB

Members of the Yadav community staged a protest here on Wednesday, alleging that the soon-to-be-released Hindi film "Yadav Ji Ki Love Story" could disturb social harmony and hurt community sentiments. The protest saw people from several villages gather near Khirni crossing on Ganwa Road and burn posters of the film. The demonstrators demanded an immediate ban on the movie's release. The protesters said they objected to the title as well as the movie, which shows a woman from the community having a romantic affair with a person from a different religion, which was "derogatory". The small budget romantic drama directed by Ankit Bhadana and produced by Sandeep Tomar under the banner of Om Thakurani Production, features debutantes such as Pragati Tiwari, and Vishal Mohan. The release of the film is scheduled for 27 February. *—PTI*

Chhattisgarh HC acquits rape accused on a technicality

RAIPUR, 18 FEB

The Chhattisgarh High Court has ruled that ejaculation without penetration amounts to an attempt to commit rape, but does not constitute the offence of rape.

Hearing an appeal against a 2004 conviction, the court examined the victim's cross-examination in which she stated that the accused kept his penis above her vagina but did not penetrate her. The trial court had sentenced the accused to seven years' imprisonment for rape, holding that he had sexual intercourse with her against her will.

The High Court, however, modified the conviction to attempt to rape.

It noted that medical evidence showed the hymen was not ruptured, though the tip of one finger "could be introduced in the vagina", indicating possible partial penetration. The court reiterated that even slight penetration is sufficient for a rape conviction, provided there is clear and cogent evidence that some part of the accused's virile member entered the labia of the pudendum. . *—Agencies*

Man slits pregnant wife's throat with scissors after argument in car

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

A 31-year-old chartered accountant killed his pregnant wife by stabbing her with a scissors during an argument in Haryana's Jhajjar district and tried to pass it off as a robbery gone wrong.

The victim, 27-year-old Mehak Dhawan, was a bank employee and married to Anshul Dhawan, a chartered accountant. Mehak was two months pregnant at the time of the murder. The couple had married on 25 September last year and were living in Gurugram.

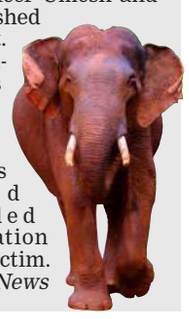
According to the police, Anshul had allegedly made a Dial 112 call claiming that a newly married couple had been attacked and that the woman had been killed during a robbery. When the police reached the crime scene, Anshul told them that some unidentified men had intercepted their car, murdered his wife and fled with the vehicle. Mehak's body was later found near a canal.

Police said Anshul had objected to Mehak's frequent phone conversations with colleagues at the bank and had consequently suspected his wife's character. Anshul admitted that he had planned the killing and had brought scissors with him, the police said. Badli Station House Officer Suresh Kumar said, that the investigators soon detected inconsistencies in Anshul's account. "During questioning, he tried to mislead the police. But after sustained interrogation, he broke down and confessed," Kumar said. *—Salar News*

FARMER TRAMPLED TO DEATH BY TUSKER IN MYSURU

MYSURU, 18 FEB

A wild tusker trampled a farmer to death when he was working in his agricultural fields at Parinamipura in Talakadu Hobli in T Narasipura taluk of Mysuru district on Wednesday. According to the police, the deceased has been identified as Gurumallappa, 48, of the village. A wild tusker which had strayed out of the forest attacked the man and killed him on the spot. T Narasipura Range Forest officer Umesh and others rushed to the spot. Irate villagers vented their ire on forest officials and demanded compensation for the victim. *—Salar News*



IFTAR PREPS

People shop for dates and other dry fruits in Srinagar on Wednesday as Ramadan begins *—PTI*

Cheetah count at 38 after birth of 3 cubs

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Three cheetah cubs have been born at Madhya Pradesh's Kuno National Park, taking India's total population of the species to 38, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav announced on Wednesday.

The cubs are offspring of Gamini, a cheetah trans located from South Africa as part of India's efforts to revive the population of the world's fastest land animal. This marks Gamini's second litter and the ninth successful cheetah birth in the country, bringing the number of surviving Indian-born cubs to 27. Yadav said, "A moment of pride for Kuno and India – may Gamini and her three little sprinters grow strong and carry the nation's cheetah revival story forward with speed and grace." Project Cheetah project saw the world's first intercontinental translocation of a large carnivore, with 20 cheetahs brought from Namibia and South Africa to India in 2022–23. *—PTI*

DOCUMENTARY HONOURS SECULAR VISIONARY K RAHMAN KHAN

A new Urdu documentary on Dr K Rahman Khan journals his unwavering commitment to education, social upliftment, and inclusive development.

Titled 'A Guiding Light for the Community', the documentary traces Dr Khan's contributions as a visionary leader who worked for empowerment and institutional growth. His tenure in public life reflects a combination of integrity, foresight, and humility. The film emphasizes how his leadership extended beyond politics, focusing instead on strengthening communities, promoting harmony, and nurturing young minds.

Eminent personalities reflect on his impact. Former vice president Hamid Ansari speaks of his intellectual clarity and balanced approach to public service. Veteran statesman Yashwant Sinha acknowledges his steadfast principles and dedication to democratic values. Former Rajya Sabha MP Adeeb highlights his administrative vision and community-oriented initiatives. Former chief minister M Veerappa Moily reflects on his inclusive outlook, while former minister Roshan Baig and Salar Publications Trustee Sadaqat Peeran recall his accessibility and personal warmth.

Adding a lyrical dimension to the film is a soulful ghazal rendered by Raghu Pati Jhai.

The documentary by Sabiha Zubair Khan stands as a historical record of a compassionate leader respected across political lines and ideologies.

Scan the QR code below to watch the documentary, streaming on Salar Urdu Digital Youtube from 15 February.

Google announces India, US subsea connectivity

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Betting big on India's AI potential, Google CEO Sundar Pichai on Wednesday announced a new subsea cable project aimed at boosting AI connectivity between India, the US, and other regions under the India-America Connect Initiative. The cable will also link multiple locations across the Southern Hemisphere.

Earlier in the day, Pichai met Prime Minister Narendra Modi on the sidelines of the AI Impact Summit 2026 in Delhi. "We discussed how Google is helping with his mission to infuse AI at all levels in India to improve health, expand access to information in all languages, support startups, agriculture, and much more," Pichai said.

As part of the engagement, Pichai announced partnerships to provide cloud infrastructure support to over 20 million public servants across 800 districts in 18 languages. This includes initiatives such as the Google AI Professional Certificate for students and early-career professionals. Pichai also highlighted the USD 15-billion AI hub recently announced for Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh. The hub will house a gigawatt-scale compute facility and an international subsea cable gateway. "AI is the biggest platform shift of our lifetime," Pichai said. He emphasised AI applications across healthcare, education, climate resilience, and more, noting India's high adoption of AI voice and visual search. *—PTI*

>>>More on Page 7

Expo is shut to public on 19 Feb and will remain open on 21 Feb

GALGOTIAS A NATIONAL EMBARRASSMENT

'Made in India' robodog turns out to be Chinese at AI summit

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

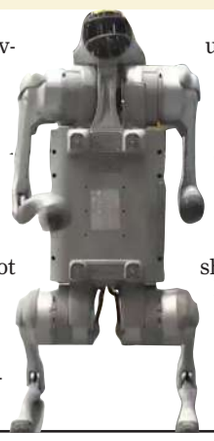
Private university Galgotias was asked to vacate its stall at the AI Impact Summit after it showcased a robotic dog as its own innovation, only for social media users to identify it as a Chinese-made device.

University representatives presented the robot, named Orion, as a creation of the Centre of Excellence at Galgotias. Online users, however, pointed out that it was a Unitree Go2 manufactured by Unitree Robotics and widely used globally for research and education.

Following the backlash, organisers cut the power supply to the university's stall and asked it to leave. IT Secretary S Krishnan said the government would not allow exhibitors to showcase items that were not their own. the Greater Noida-based institution apologised, saying the staff member at the pavilion was "ill-informed" and not authorised to speak to the press. It denied any "institutional intent to misrepresent" and said it vacated the premises understanding the organiser's sentiment.

"Instead of leveraging India's talent and data, the AI summit is a disorganised PR spectacle - Indian data up for sale, Chinese products showcased," Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said in a post on X.

BJP hit back, accusing him of attempting to tarnish India's image. *—PTI*



A Guinness record for highest responsible AI use pledges

The IndiaAI Impact Summit has entered the Guiness World Records for the highest number of pledges taken by students for the responsible use of AI within 24 hours, the British record-keeping entity. Guinness World Records Adjudicator Pravin Patel announced that a total of 2,50,946 pledges were received during the summit.

Youth dies by accident in Mysuru jathre celebration

MYSURU, 18 FEB

A 22-year-old youth died after he slipped down from Bandi Utsav celebrations organised as part of the Bandarasamma Jathre celebrations at Talakadu on Wednesday. The deceased has been identified as Praveen of Talakadu. He was riding Bandi during the utsav on Tuesday evening when he fell and suffered severe injuries. A video clip of the youth falling from the Bandi during the festival circulated on social media. Praveen was taken to the District hospital in Mysuru, where he died of bleeding on Wednesday. The police have registered a case in the incident. *—Salar News*

—FREEPIK

Tiger kills cow in Gundlupet

MYSURU, 18 FEB

Panic prevailed in Madapatana village of Gundlupet taluk on Wednesday after a tiger attacked and killed a cow outside the village. The cow belongs to one Gurumallappa, a villager. He shouted for help when he saw the tiger and alerted the villagers, who reached the spot. The villagers demanded that the forest department officials provide compensation to the farmer for the death of the cow. Gundlupet Police and Forest officials reached the spot after receiving the information. *—Salar News*

21 Cong MLAs fly abroad amid power tussle

Those travelling are CM loyalists & will return before Budget

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

At least 21 Congress MLAs have left for a foreign tour ahead of the state Budget, amid an ongoing power tussle within the ruling party. Chief Minister Siddaramaiah is set to present a record 17th Budget on 6 March, shortly after the Legislature Session begins. The session will run until 27 March.

Party sources said 11 MLAs flew out on Tuesday, while 10 more are scheduled to leave with their families. Those travelling are considered loyal to the Chief Minister. Among them are C Puttaranga Shetty, B Devendrappa, HD Thammaiah, Hampanagouda Badarli, B M Nagaraj, A Vasanth Kumar, D Thimmaiah and Sharanagouda Patil Bayyapur.

The legislators are touring Australia and New Zealand via Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Party sources said 11 MLAs flew out on Tuesday, while 10 more are scheduled to leave with their families *—FILE*

They are expected to return on 2 or 3 March.

The MLAs insisted the trip is purely personal. "We are going on a private tour. It's just my family and me," Thammaiah told reporters at Kempegowda International Airport. He said the decision was taken during the Belagavi legislative session and added that overseas trips were not unusual. Badarli stressed that all participants were funding the visit themselves, noting previous trips to Muscat, Europe and the United States.

- The MLAs insisted the trip is purely personal. "We are going on a private tour. It's just my family and me," Thammaiah told reporters at the Kempegowda International Airport.

Responding to suggestions that those travelling belonged to Siddaramaiah's camp, Puttaranga Shetty said the Chief Minister was unaware of the visit.

MLAs seen as close to Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar dismissed speculation of factionalism, calling it a group of "common friends travelling abroad together". Ravi Ganiga said the Congress high command would take decisions at the appropriate time. *—PTI*

Copy-paste BJP govt: CM mocks Galgotias row

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Amid the Galgotias University robodog controversy, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah on Wednesday launched a scathing attack on the BJP-led Centre, accusing it of "copy-paste" politics.

In a post on X, he said: "First, they copied UPA schemes and Congress guarantees and rebranded them as their own grand vision. Now, even technology is copy-paste. As the leader, so the follower. And India's reputation suffers. That is the real shame." He further alleged that the Modi government does not believe in "Make in India" but in "Fake in India".

The remarks come amid criticism over the ongoing India AI Impact Summit 2026 in the capital. Karnataka Minister for Electronics Priyank Kharge accused organisers of mishandling the event, claiming that innovators invited to showcase their work were asked to leave.

"When we call builders, innovators and inventors to a so-called global platform, we should behave like it. You cannot throw out people you invited for a PR stunt," he told ANI, adding that some foreign delegates were withdrawing.

Congress president Mallikarjun Kharge also attacked the Centre, alleging that what could have been a "showpiece" AI Summit had turned into "utter chaos". He claimed exhibitors and visitors faced extreme distress, including lack of food and water, and alleged instances of product theft. He further criticised the Prime Minister's presence on the first day as a "photo opportunity". *—Salar News*

'DEFIED LEADERS' DIKTAT'

—AI

Village boycotts family for taking land dispute to court

CHAMARAJANAGAR, 18 FEB

A family in Mole village of Kollegal taluk, Chamarajanagar, has allegedly been subjected to social boycott for approaching a court to resolve a land dispute, defying the diktat of local village leaders.

Prabhuswamy and his family have reportedly faced a social boycott for about a month after seeking legal intervention. Sources said he had initially appealed to village elders to settle the dispute, but turned to the courts when no action was taken. "I approached the court after the elders did not attend to my plea. I had no alternative but to seek justice through legal means," he said.

He added that the family remained silent for nearly a month to avoid further repercussions and because they did not want to leave their ancestral village.

The family claims the boycott has made daily life unbearable. Villagers allegedly refuse to speak to them, shopkeepers deny them goods, and labourers have declined to work on their farmland. They say they have been excluded from social and religious functions, and anyone interacting with them risks penalties.

Despite approaching the police, they allege no effective relief has been provided or FIR registered. However, Kollegal DSP Dharmendra told Salar News that no such incident had been reported and asked the family to approach him so that the matter could be addressed.

A group of villagers, requesting anonymity, expressed outrage at the village leaders' decision, calling it inhumane. "We feel bad about the family's suffering. Legal action must be initiated against those responsible to curb such injustices," they said.

Social boycott, widely regarded as unjust and cruel, continues in some rural areas despite legal prohibitions. In December 2025, the Karnataka government passed a Bill criminalising social ostracism, making such acts punishable under law. *—Salar News*

Ex-ISRO worker strangles wife in City, arrested

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

A 65-year-old retired ISRO employee allegedly strangled his wife to death with a towel at their residence in the City on Wednesday, police said.

CRIME BEAT

The incident was reported at around 11am within the Avalahalli police station limits in the City.

The accused, Nageshwar Rao, has been taken into police custody.

A senior police officer said Rao was reportedly undergoing treatment for depression.Rao allegedly wanted to end his life after killing his wife, police added.

After the alleged attack on his wife, Sandya Sri, Rao reportedly remained at the spot. He then contacted an acquaintance, who alerted the police.A police team arrived at the residence and took Rao into custody.The couple's daughter, who is in the US, has been informed about the incident, police said. A case of murder has been registered. *—PTI*

Charred body found in Hassan

HASSAN, 18 FEB

A charred body of a 58-year-old man was found at an isolated place in Alur taluk of Hassan district, police said on Wednesday.

The deceased was identified as Veerappa, 58, who worked as a driver with the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC), they said.

The incident came to light on Tuesday near Rajanahalli in Alur taluk of Hassan district, police said.

Veerappa's body was found completely charred, raising suspicion that it could be a premeditated murder, they added. "Only after the post-mortem is conducted will we be able to ascertain the exact cause of death.

Experts from the Forensic Science Laboratory (FSL) have also visited the spot and collected necessary evidence," a senior police officer said.

Based on the preliminary inquiry, a case of murder has been registered. *—PTI*

Three arrested in the City for kidnapping spa owner

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Police have arrested three individuals in the City for allegedly kidnapping a spa owner for ransom, rescuing the victim during a swift operation. The incident began on 15 February, when a complaint was lodged at Electronic City Police Station in the City by a spa manager from Akshayanagar, Begur.

The complainant reported that while travelling home on a two-wheeler with the spa owner, unknown assailants in a car intercepted them near Bettadasanapura on Arena Sports Road. The kidnappers verbally abused, assaulted the complainant with deadly weapons, and forcibly took the spa owner in their vehicle. They then demanded Rs 2 lakh ransom, threatening to kill the owner.

Following investigations and credible informant tips, police traced and apprehended the three suspects along with the kidnapped man on 17 February. During interrogation, it was revealed that one suspect, working at an apartment in Gottigere, had misappropriated funds and lost money in online gaming. To cover his losses, he assumed the spa owner had money, leading to the kidnapping. The police seized a car, deadly weapons, three mobile phones, and Rs 9,700 cash. The trio was produced before court on 18 February and placed in police custody. *—ANI*

BJP leader abuses Khandre; faces FIR

BIDAR, 18 FEB

A First Information Report (FIR) has been lodged against former Union minister Bhagwant Khuba for allegedly using abusive language against Forest Minister Eshwar Khandre.

The complaint was filed by Congress worker Suresh Biradar at Bhalki Town Police Station, following which the FIR was registered with permission from the Civil and JMFC Court in Bhalki.

According to the FIR, Khuba reportedly made derogatory remarks, including statements such as: "Eshwar Khandre's downfall has begun; even if you die, you will not attain salvation?".

Bhagwant Khuba, Eshwar Khandre *—WIKIPEDIA*

The remarks allegedly occurred on 7 February, during the launch of development works at Papnash Temple, when Khuba protested and was detained by police along with other BJP leaders. After being taken into custody, he reportedly went live on Facebook and made the alleged abusive comments. *—Salar News*

ASH WEDNESDAY

Devotees seek blessings at Sacred Hearts Church in Bengaluru on Ash Wednesday, marking the start of Lent, a 40-day period of fasting and prayerleading up to Easter *—SCREENGRAB*

BJP flays govt for restricting media inside Vidhana Soudha

BIDAR, 18 FEB

The opposition BJP on Wednesday criticised the Congress government over its reported decision to regulate where media persons can conduct interviews inside Vidhana Soudha, asserting that it reflected the "anti-democratic" approach of the ruling dispensation.

The criticism comes in the wake of a January 9 official communication directing police that accredited media persons can obtain sound bytes and statements only at a designated spot near the West Gate portico of Vidhana Soudha, in the interest of security.

"The BJP condemns this strongly. We are unable to understand why such an anti-people stand is taken," BJP state president B Y Vijayendra told reporters.

Leader of Opposition in the Assembly R Ashoka criticised the move in a post on X. "In the red Constitution book that your supreme leader Rahul Gandhi carries and showcases everywhere he goes, is there no freedom of the press for the media? Or is it the fear that more irregularities will be exposed, such as the recent media reports on alleged theft of lakhs of rupees worth of gold and cash from the office of your close associate and minister Byrathi Suresh...," he asked Chief Minister Siddaramaiah. *—PTI*

3 OF A FAMILY KILLED AFTER BIKE COLLIDES WITH TRUCK IN RAIBAG

RAIBAG, 18 FEB

Three members of a family, a husband, wife, and their young daughter were killed in a head-on collision between a motorcycle and a truck on the Jamkhandi-Miraj State highway near Alaknur village, Belagavi district.

The deceased are Gireppa Kundrali, 38, his wife Manjula, 27, and their seven-year-old daughter Aradhya, residents of Jaisingpur in Maharashtra's Sangli district.

Gireppa, employed in Jaisingpur, was travelling with his family to visit his ailing mother when the accident occurred near a curve at Alaknur.

The truck reportedly collided head-on with their motorcycle, causing severe injuries.

Manjula and Aradhya died instantly, while Gireppa later died in hospital. Harugeri police have registered a case and are investigating. *—Salar News*

'IF THEY OBSTRUCT DISPOSAL'

DKS threatens to dump garbage near BJP MLAs' homes

BENGALURU, 18 FEB

Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar has issued a stern warning to BJP MLAs and leaders, stating that if they obstruct garbage disposal in the City, garbage will be dumped in front of their houses. "Behave yourself, else we will take strict action under the Essential Services Act. We will dump garbage in front of the houses of those BJP MLAs and leaders who obstruct garbage disposal," he declared at the KPCC office.

Asked about obstruction at Mahadevapura, Shivakumar said, "MLAs are blackmailing

DyCM DK Shivakumar added that two more disposal sites had been purchased and tenders called, with a decision pending legal clearance *—PTI*

for funds while objecting to disposing waste in their constituency. Arvind Limbavali and Doddaballapura MLA Dheeraj Muniraju have blackmailed us. If they keep objecting, where do we dispose of the garbage? We will have to send it to the homes of R Ashok, Vijayendra or BJP party office."

He further explained, "We need to dispose of garbage somewhere. We are continuing to do so in the same places as before. They are blackmailing us to get funds for their constituencies." On waste truck accidents, he stated, "Accidents should not happen, law will take its course. But garbage disposal can't be stopped. Waste is being disposed of in the constituencies of ST Somashekar, Shivanna and Krishna Byregowda too."

Shivakumar added that two more disposal sites had been purchased and tenders called, with a decision pending legal clearance. Regarding contractors threatening to halt work over alleged increased commissions, he said, "Ask them to file a complaint. The BJP government had called tenders worth Rs 30,000-40,000 crores, despite a Rs 10,000 crore budget. How can this be resolved now?" *—Salar News*

—WIKIPEDIA

Mayawati denies 'fake news' on BSP tie-up for '27 polls

LUCKNOW, 18 FEB

Mayawati on Wednesday rubbished as "fake news" reports that the Bahujan Samaj Party would contest the 2027 Uttar Pradesh Assembly elections in alliance with other parties, asserting it will fight independently. At a press conference, the former chief minister alleged that such speculation was being spread using artificial intelligence to mislead voters. She said she had already announced at a rally in Lucknow on 9 October, 2025, marking the death anniversary of founder Kanshi Ram, that the BSP would go it alone. Accusing the Indian National Congress, Samajwadi Party and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) of narrow politics, she urged workers to stay focused and target a full majority in the 2027 elections. —PTI

Violence erupts during farmers' protest in Bathinda

BATHINDA, 18 FEB

Police fired tear gas on Wednesday to disperse protesting farmers in Bathinda following clashes erupted during a demonstration demanding the release of two jailed farmers. The protesters, led by Bharti Kisan Union (Ekta Ugrahan), had assembled in Punjab's Jeond village and planned to march to the Bathinda District Administrative Complex. Heavy police deployment was in place to block their advance. Senior Superintendent of Police Jyoti Yadav Bains alleged that protesters hurled stones from rooftops, prompting action. Several farmers were detained. Farmers, however, claimed police used force without provocation and accused officers of detaining leaders ahead of the protest. In Patiala district, police also intercepted farmers travelling to join the demonstration, leading to minor scuffles. —PTI

Roads named after Tipu Sultan not tolerated: Rane

THANE, 18 FEB

Nitesh Rane has stated that public squares named after Tipu Sultan will not be tolerated, insisting such spaces "should be built in Pakistan and Islamabad". His remarks came after Harshwardhan Sapkal faced criticism for comparing Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj to Tipu Sultan. After which Sapkal later apologised, claiming his words were deliberately distorted. Rane warned that any effort to retain or create Tipu-named squares would be met with opposition. At the Malvani Mahotsav in Thane, he announced plans for a 'Konkan Bhavan' in Thane, aimed at supporting migrants from the Konkan region. He also highlighted opportunities in agriculture, fisheries, tourism, and maritime sectors along Konkan's 877 km coastline. —PTI

Meghalaya bans MLAs from taking selfies in House

SHILLONG, 18 FEB

Meghalaya Assembly Speaker Thomas A Sangma on Wednesday banned recording of selfie videos inside the House and posting these on social media by MLAs, citing that such activities breach the parliamentary decorum. The ruling came after Opposition Voice of the People's Party chief Ardent Basaiawmoit uploaded a video clip showing him attending the Budget Session. Later, the legislator deleted the post. The Speaker also said making selfie videos inside the Assembly was "not in keeping with the spirit of the rules to be observed by members provided by Rule 275 of the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business". —PTI

Gogoi just face of Assam Congress, Hussain soul: Borah

Ex-Cong prez dropped a bomb by joining BJP

GUWAHATI, 18 FEB

Former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah; Dhubri MP Rakibul Hussain —PTI

Former Assam Congress president Bhupen Borah, who is set to join the BJP, on Wednesday claimed that the opposition party's state unit is no longer under the control of Gaurav Gogoi, and Dhubri MP Rakibul Hussain is its "sole base".

In an interview with PTI-Video, Borah claimed Gogoi, the state Congress president, is just "the mere face of the party now".

"Rakibul Hussain, who had won the Dhubri seat by over 10 lakh votes, is the sole base of the party," he claimed.

Borah said that after he sent his resignation letter to the Congress high command on Monday, Leader of the Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi called him and spoke at length about the "relationship we shared since 2007".

"He mentioned how we helped the party grow, and he helped me over the years, which is true, but he did not say a word about my resignation letter," he claimed.

Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma announced that Borah would be joining the BJP on 22 February, after meeting him at his residence on Tuesday evening.

Borah, who was the chairman of 'Assam Sanmilita Mancha' -- a front of 16 opposition parties, said that before the bypolls to the five assembly constituencies in 2024, it was decided that a CPI(ML) candidate would contest the Behali seat as the outfit had secured 40,000 votes in the previous election.

Meanwhile, Gogoi on Wednesday said those who joined the ruling BJP have become "insignificant" in their political journey.

The deputy leader of the Congress in Lok Sabha also challenged Sarma to a "face-to-face" debate on Hinduism to check who is well-versed with the actual ethos of the religion.

Gogoi said the fight in the upcoming assembly elections will be between the "real Congress and old Congress".

Additionally, the Congress staged a walkout in the Assam Assembly on Wednesday, demanding the disqualification of two former party MLAs, Abdur Rashid Mandal and Sherman Ali Ahmed, who joined the Akhil Gogoi-led Raijor Dal. Both are three-time MLAs from Western Assam. —PTI

AI IMPACT SUMMIT

AI emerging as new pillar of India-Europe relations

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

President of Spain Pedro Sanchez Perez-Castejon with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in New Delhi, on Wednesday —PTI

- In their talks, Modi and Finland Prime Minister Petteri Orpo welcomed the India-EU free trade agreement, holding that it will serve as a catalyst for shared progress and prosperity.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Spanish President Pedro Sanchez on Wednesday hailed artificial intelligence (AI) as a transformative force and underlined the need for closer India-Spain cooperation to leverage its potential for inclusive development.

In his talks with Modi, the Spanish President said the AI Impact Summit could emerge as turning point to shape a global framework for artificial intelligence as the two leaders held talks on boosting bilateral cooperation in defence, trade, and critical energy sectors.

The Prime Minister held bilateral talks with Sanchez and several other leaders including his counterparts from Finland, Croatia, Bhutan and Kazakhstan as well as presidents of Estonia and Serbia on the margins of the AI Impact Summit here.

Besides artificial intelligence, the other dominant focus of Modi's bilateral talks with leaders from Europe was the free trade agreement between India and the 27-nation European Union and how it will act as a strong catalyst to shore up bilateral trade and investment ties.

In their talks, Modi and Finland Prime Minister Petteri Orpo welcomed the India-EU free trade agreement, holding that it will serve as a catalyst for shared progress and prosperity.

Modi and Orpo called for doubling bilateral trade and greater technology collaboration, including in co-development of quantum and 6G, renewables, circular economy, and defence, the MEA said.

The PM's talks with his Croatian counterpart Andrej Plenkovic saw the two leaders discussing ways to strengthen bilateral cooperation across a wide spectrum of areas including trade and investment, science and technology, connectivity, cultural exchanges and people-to-people ties.

In his talks with Modi, Bhutanese Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay thanked his Indian counterpart for New Delhi's support to Bhutan's 13th Five Year Plan as well as to the Gelephu Mindfulness city project. Modi also met Kazakhstan Prime Minister Olzhas Bektenov.

Meanwhile, French President Emmanuel Macron, along with First Lady Brigitte Macron, left Mumbai for New Delhi on Wednesday after concluding his engagements here, including bilateral talks with Modi. —PTI

SC SAYS ED WAS TERRORISED

I-PAC raids: TMC claims Centre weaponising ED

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court on Tuesday adjourned to 18 March the hearing on a plea moved by the ED (Enforcement Directorate) alleging obstruction by the West Bengal government, including by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, in its search operation at the I-PAC office and the premises of its director in connection with an alleged coal pilferage scam.

A bench of Justices Prashant Kumar Mishra and KV Viswanathan deferred the matter after Solicitor General Tushar Mehta told the court that a rejoinder will be filed during the day.

The top court on 15 January said the West Bengal Chief Minister's alleged "obstruction" in ED's probe is "very serious" and agreed to examine if a state's law-enforcing agencies can interfere with any central agency's probe into any serious offence, as it stayed FIRs against the agency's officials who raided political consultancy I-PAC on 8 January.

SC said that ED was terrorised as TMC claimed that the Centre had weaponised the agency. —PTI

EC issuing poll directions on WhatsApp: TMC

TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee on Wednesday alleged that poll officials were continuing to flout Supreme Court directives by issuing directions to their subordinates through WhatsApp during the SIR exercise in West Bengal. SC emphasised transparency and adherence to official channels of communication. He questioned instructions sent by special roll observer C Murugan, alleging login credentials of observers were misused. —PTI

Muslim quota: Oppn slams 'anti-minority' M'rashtra govt

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

SP leader Abu Asim Azmi —PTI

The Opposition on Wednesday said the BJP-led Maharashtra government's decision to cancel the 5 per cent reservation for Muslims in education and jobs has exposed its "anti-minority" mindset.

A Government Resolution stated that all previous decisions and the ordinance related to the five per cent reservation in government, semi-government jobs and educational institutions for the socially and educationally backward Muslim group under the Special Backward Category (A) have been cancelled.

Congress leaders termed the decision "harmful to democracy" which would push the community away from the mainstream.

The NCP (Sharadchandra Pawar) said the quota cancellation decision proves that the BJP doesn't value Muslim leaders of the party and its allies.

Samajwadi Party leader Abu Asim Azmi questioned the rationale behind formally withdrawing an ordinance on the quota that had already lapsed years ago.

He suggested that sub-classification within the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes (SEBC) category could ensure equitable distribution of reservation benefits, provided it remains within the 50 per cent cap and is backed by reliable data and surveys.

Meanwhile, Rohit Pawar demanded that Civil Aviation Minister K Rammohan Naidu be removed from his post until the probe into former Maharashtra deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar's plane crash is completed. —PTI

> They (leaders of the ruling party) don't want the youth from the Muslim community to become IAS and IPS officers
>
> -Imtiaz Jaleel, AIMIM leader and former MP

OFFICIAL REMOVED OVER MINORITY STATUS CLEARANCES

Maharashtra official Milind Padmanabh Shenoy was removed from the Minority Development Department on Tuesday over his alleged role in the hasty grant of minority status to 75 institutes. Approvals were reportedly rushed following the death of deputy chief minister Ajit Pawar. This dismissal comes a day after Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis froze clearances pending a high-level inquiry. A high-level inquiry has been ordered to ascertain how the files were processed. —PTI

Sena questions INDIA bloc leadership

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

The Shiv Sena (UBT) on Wednesday said the question of leadership change in the Opposition INDIA bloc has resurfaced and can't be ignored, asserting that it has to be seen who will helm the alliance, in an apparent dig at the Congress.

The Uddhav Thackeray-led party referred to voices from disgruntled Congress members and those associated with UPA dispensation, who suggested that the INDIA bloc leadership should be given to West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee or Tamil Nadu CM MK Stalin.

"The decision has to be taken on Mamata, Stalin or someone else," Sena (UBT) said. Instead of waking up when elections are announced and talking about Opposition alliance, it is necessary to hold discussions among its partners and take decisions consciously, it opined. The Congress has been helming the INDIA bloc, a coalition of Opposition parties formed before the 2024 Lok Sabha polls to counter the ruling BJP-led NDA. —PTI

Not a Rahulian but a Gandhian: Shankar Aiyar

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Congress veteran **Mani Shankar Aiyar** has clarified he is a "Gandhian", "Nehruvian" and "Rajivian", but not a "Rahulian", because Rahul Gandhi is "far too much younger than me and far too distant from me in his political life".

He also stated he did not call himself "Indiravian" because he "totally disapproved" of Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency, which he described as "converting our democracy into a tyranny" for 18 months. Aiyar explained, "How can one expect me to be a 'Rahulian' when the boy is about 30 years younger than me, and I haven't had an opportunity to work with him?" He added, "I was six when Mahatma Gandhi picked me up in his arms and said 'ye mere aankhon ke suraj aur chand hain'."

He also expressed admiration for Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi, citing their influence during his formative years.

His remarks came amid tensions with the Congress, following comments on Kerala's political situation and his recent criticism of party colleagues. —PTI

AFTER RAMADAN RELAXATIONS

Telagana BJP seeks equal festival benefits for Hindus

HYDERABAD, 18 FEB

Telangana BJP Chief spokesperson NV Subhash —ANI

Criticising the Congress government in Telangana for allowing Muslim employees to leave offices early during Ramadan, the BJP on Wednesday said similar courtesies should be extended to the Hindu community.

Selective concessions risk creating a perception of discrimination, Telangana BJP chief spokesperson NV Subhash said.

He cited instances where Hindu employees observing the 41-day 'Ayyappa Deeksha' vow were discouraged from attending work in traditional black attire.

Restrictions are also frequently imposed on Hindu festivals, particularly during Ganesh Chaturthi and Deepavali, including limitations on firecrackers, he added.

"While no one objects to facilitating religious observances, the Congress government must ensure equal treatment for all communities," Subhash said.

He emphasised that "true secularism lies in equal respect and facilitation for all faiths."

The Revanth Reddy government should adopt a uniform policy framework that ensures parity in extending religious concessions, he added.

"If considerations are shown during Ramadan, they must also be extended during major Hindu observances. Equality before law and governance cannot be compromised," he added.

Referring to Chief Minister A Revanth Reddy's comments two months ago that "Congress means Muslims and Muslims mean Congress," Subhash said government actions must align with Constitutional secularism.

The Telangana government issued an order on 17 February, allowing all Muslim employees to clock out from office an hour early at 4pm during Ramadan to offer prayers, except when their presence is required due to exigencies of service. —PTI

'Amend Constitution for states, Centre balance'

CHENNAI, 18 FEB

- "Meaningful federalism is not about control, but about trust, autonomy, and governance that responds to people's realities." said MK Stalin during Tamil Nadu Assembly session.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister **MK Stalin** proposed a constitutional amendment on Wednesday to "structurally reset" the federal balance of Centre and State autonomy.

Justice Kurian Joseph committee on Centre-State relations, constituted on 15 April 2025, submitted its first report to the CM on 16 February.

Tabling the first part of the Justice Joseph report in the Tamil Nadu Assembly, Stalin stated, "Meaningful federalism is not about control, but about trust, autonomy, and governance that responds to people's realities."

States, he said, still struggled to get rights from the Centre and had to depend on the Union government for everything. "

Stalin pointed at his party, DMK, which follows the policy of autonomy in the states and federalism at the Centre.

In 1967, DMK founder and late chief minister CN Annadurai observed that the Union must be strong enough to maintain the sovereignty and integrity of the country.

Stalin recalled how his predecessor, M. Karunanidhi, pioneered this movement by establishing the 1969 Rajamannar Committee under the mantra: "Autonomy for States, Federalism at the Centre." —PTI

Film and theatre actor Pravina Deshpande dies

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Actor Pravina Deshpande, known for supporting roles in films such as Ready, Gabbar is Back and D Day, has died aged 60 after a prolonged battle with blood cancer. Her family announced her passing in an Instagram post, stating that she breathed her last on 17 February, 2026. She is survived by her husband and two children.

Deshpande was a prominent figure in Marathi theatre, television and cinema before gaining recognition in Hindi films, including 'Ek Villain' and 'Parmanu: The Story of Pokhran'. She was last seen in the Netflix series 'Taskaree: The Smuggler's Web'. The Cine and TV Artistes' Association (CINTAA) expressed condolences. Her last rites were held in Andheri. —*PTI*

Teacher leaks class 10 question paper on WhatsApp in MP

BURHANPUR, 18 FEB

A school teacher in Burhanpur district of Madhya Pradesh has been booked for allegedly sharing the Class 10 English question paper of the Madhya Pradesh Board of Secondary Education on WhatsApp to aid cheating. Rajkumari Soni, an invigilator at a government higher secondary school in Tukaithad, allegedly uploaded a photograph of the paper on her WhatsApp status at 9.06am, after the exam had begun, and shared it to obtain answers for students. Officials said 109 candidates had entered the centre before 8.40am and maintained the paper was not "leaked". Soni has been suspended and booked under the Madhya Pradesh Recognised Examination Act and the BNS. Two senior exam officials were also suspended —*PTI*

Ex-sarpanch hit by SUV during protest in Rajasthan dies

JAIPUR, 18 FEB

A former sarpanch has died after being run over during a protest against alleged road encroachment in Ajmer, police said on Wednesday. Govind Ram Gurjar was critically injured when an SUV ploughed into demonstrators from Dumda village on 11 February. He had been receiving treatment in the intensive care unit at JLN Hospital but later succumbed to his injuries. Following his death, members of the Gurjar community gathered outside the hospital mortuary, demanding the immediate arrest of all those involved. Some protesters briefly entered the hospital premises and raised slogans. Police have registered a case against four people. One accused, Parmeshwar, has been arrested, while the others remain at large —*PTI*

Branded witch, woman set on fire with baby in arms

CHAIBASA, 18 FEB

A 32-year-old woman and her baby were allegedly set on fire in Jharkhand's West Singhbhum district after she was branded a witch, police said on Wednesday. The incident happened at a village in the Kumardungi police station area late on Tuesday. The woman's husband, who managed to escape with a few injuries spent the night at a relative's place and filed a complaint with the police. He alleged that he woke up in the middle of the night after hearing that some people calling out to him and his wife. When he went out, he saw people accusing his wife of practising witchcraft.Four people have been arrested and investigation is on —*PTI*

SC junks plea on racial violence against NE people

Murder of a student from Tripura in 2025 led to filling of

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Identifying persons on grounds of race, region, sex and caste would be regressive, the Supreme Court said on Wednesday while refusing to entertain a PIL seeking to prevent violence against citizens from Northeast and other regions.

The apex court asked Attorney General R Venkataramani to consider and refer the petition to an appropriate authority.

At the outset, petitioner Anoop Prakash Awasthi, a Delhi-based lawyer, said the matter was raised on the floor of Parliament but lawmakers declined to make any such agency to deal with such hate crimes. The PIL was filed on 28 December, 2025 in the backdrop of the brutal killing of **Anjel Chakma**, a 24-year-old MBA student from Tripura. Chakma died on 26 December to grievous injuries sustained in a racially motivated attack in Selaqui area of Dehradun.

Angel Chakma, a student from Tripura who was brutally killed in Dehradun in 2025 —*X*

The lawyer said no one came forward to save Chakma.

The apex court refused to entertain the PIL and said "The instant writ petition is disposed of with liberty to the petitioner to hand over the soft copy of the petition to the office of AG, also along with a copy of this order," the bench said, adding that the top law officer will do the needful.

- PIL has sought judicial intervention to address the "continuing constitutional failure" to prevent and respond to racial discrimination and violence against citizens from Northeast.

The PIL has sought judicial intervention to address the "continuing constitutional failure" to prevent and respond to racial discrimination and violence against citizens from northeastern states and other frontier regions.

Chakma had gone to Dehradun after completing his graduation in Holy Cross School, Agartala, to pursue an MBA. He was stabbed to death in the presence of his younger brother Michael. His family members want capital punishment or at least life imprisonment for all the accused —*PTI*

Accused gets bail in 2024 Pune Porsche accident case

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court on Wednesday granted bail to an accused in the 2024 Pune Porsche accident case on grounds of parity.

The case relates to a 19 May, 2024, incident in which a Porsche car allegedly driven by a 17-year-old boy under the influence of alcohol, fatally knocked down two IT professionals in Pune's Kalyani Nagar area.

The court noted that Ashpak Basha Makandar had been in jail since 20 months while three other accused have already been granted bail.

Makandar reportedly facilitated the criminal conspiracy to tamper with medical evidence by swapping of blood samples of the minor occupants with those of their guardians at the hospital.

Amar Santish Gaikwad (alleged middleman), Aditya Avinash Sood and Ashish Satish Mittal (parents of two other juveniles in the car) -- had been in custody for 18 months.

The court sought a response from the Maharashtra government on pleas filed by two other accused seeking bail in the case.

The Bombay High Court had rejected the bail pleas of eight accused.

The Juvenile Justice Board (JJB) had granted bail to the minor accused on lenient terms, sparking nationwide outrage. He was sent to an observation home later. —*PTI*

SC bars exhumation of bodies of tribal Christians in Chhattisgarh

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court on Wednesday sought Chhattisgarh government's response on a plea that alleged exhumation and forced reburial of bodies of tribal Christians in villages there.

It also restrained any further exhumation.

The court passed the order while hearing a plea, which claimed that tribal Christians were forcibly prevented from burying their deceased family members in the burial places in their villages.

The petitioners, Chattisgarh Association for Justice and Equality and others alleged that this was a denial of their fundamental right under Article 21 of the Constitution.

The prtitioner's counsel said the body of the mother of one of the petitioners was exhumed from grave and reburied elsewhere without his knowledge. The body of another man was exhumed by villagers from the majority community and reburied at a distant place. —*PTI*

Groping, disrobing is 'attempt to rape': SC sets aside Allahabad HC order

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Supreme Court has ruled that grabbing of breasts and pulling the pyjama string amount to "attempt to rape", setting aside a controversial Allahabad High Court order.

The high court had said these were only "preparation to commit rape".

The top court said the impugned order was liable to be set aside on account of the "patently erroneous application of the settled principles of criminal jurisprudence".

The court passed the order on a suo motu plea, taking

cognisance of the Allahabad High Court order.

SC restored the original stringent charge of attempt to rape against two accused under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act.

The apex court said a bare perusal of these allegations leaves no "modicum of doubt" that the case sought to be made out is that the accused persons proceeded with a pre-determined intent to commit an offence.

The order was passed by Justice Ram Manohar Narayan Mishra on a revision petition filed by two persons who moved the court, challenging the order of a special judge of Kasganj by which the court had summoned them for groping a teenager. —*PTI*

MULTIPLE FRAUD CASES

Can't return to India; barred from leaving UK: Mallya

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Fugitive businessman Vijay Mallya, facing multiple cases of fraud and money laundering, told the Bombay High Court on Wednesday that he cannot say when he will return to India as he is legally barred from leaving the UK.

Mallya said he did not have an active passport after it was revoked and hence cannot give a definite date of return to India.

His statement was submitted the apex court had made it clear that it would not hear Mallya's plea against the order declaring a fugitive economic offender until he returns to India.

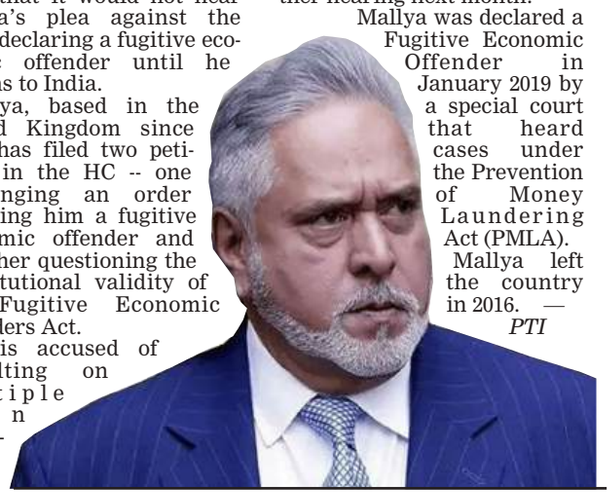
Mallya, based in the United Kingdom since 2016, has filed two petitions in the HC -- one challenging an order declaring him a fugitive economic offender and the other questioning the constitutional validity of the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act.

He is accused of defaulting on multiple loan repayments of several thousand crores and facing money laundering charges.

There are orders of courts in England and Wales that prohibit him from leaving the country.

The senior counsel reiterated that Mallya's presence was not required in the country for the court to hear his pleas against the fugitive tag and the provisions of the Act.

The apex court directed the Union government to file its reply to Mallya's statement and posted the matter for further hearing next month.



Mallya was declared a Fugitive Economic Offender in January 2019 by a special court that heard cases under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA).

Mallya left the country in 2016. —*PTI*

ED attaches Malayalam actor Jayasurya's assets in fraud case

KOCHI, 18 FEB

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has provisionally attached an immovable asset worth Rs 39.01 lakh belonging to Malayalam actor Jayasurya as part of a money laundering investigation, official sources said on Wednesday.

The attachment order was issued on Tuesday under the Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA). The property, located in Kerala, is alleged to have been received

by the 47-year-old actor in connection with the case.

Jayasurya and his wife were questioned by the central agency in December 2025 over allegations that several individuals were cheated through an online bidding application called 'Save Box'. The investment scheme was reportedly operated by a man identified as Swathi Rahim.

According to sources, the ED's investigation is based on at least four FIRs registered by the Thrissur East Police. The agency is examining financial transactions linked to the scheme to determine whether any funds constitute proceeds of crime. —*PTI*

Sabarimala priest gets bail in gold loss case

KOLLAM, 18 FEB

A vigilance court on Wednesday granted bail to Sabarimala tantri (chief priest) Kandararu Rajeevaru in the cases related to alleged misappropriation of gold from the Lord Ayyappa shrine, police sources said.

Rajeevaru is the 16th accused related to the loss of gold from the Dwarapalaka (guardian deity) idols and A-13 in the case pertaining to the loss of the precious metal from the door frames of the sanctum sanctorum. He was granted bail in both these cases.

The special investigation team probing the cases has alleged that Rajeevaru was aware that gold-clad plates were removed from the Sabarimala temple without completing due process. —*PTI*

What happened, happened: Killer and rapist smiles

INDORE, 18 FEB

A 24-year-old woman was allegedly strangled to death by her boyfriend in Indore, with police stating the accused showed no remorse following the crime.

Piyush Dhamnotia was arrested a day after the woman's decomposed body was discovered on 13 February, in a rented room in Dwarkapuri. Neighbours had alerted police after noticing a strong foul smell. Officers forced entry and found the woman naked, with rope marks around her neck.

According to investigators, the couple had known each other since their student days and frequently quarrelled over marriage, as the woman reportedly wanted to settle

down. On 10 February, the accused allegedly brought her to his accommodation to resolve their differences. During another argument, he is said to have tied her hands and feet, taped her mouth to prevent her from screaming, and strangled her with a rope.

Police claim he remained in the room drinking alcohol beside the body before fleeing to Panvel. He used the victim's phone to circulate objectionable videos. — *Agencies*

Kerala Excise Minister defends extension of bar timings

T'PURAM, 18 FEB

Kerala Excise Minister MB Rajesh on Wednesday defended the government's decision to extend the timings of bars across the state, saying that it was already in effect in tourist destination.

Rajesh said that the state charges Rs 35 lakh as license fees from bars across Kerala irrespective of whether they are located in tourist destinations or other places.

But, only the bars in tourist destinations were allowed to operate from 10 am to midnight, leading to complaints of discrimination and demands for bringing uniformity in the timings.Bar timings were longer in the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh while the license fees there were much less than in Kerala.

The Malankara Orthodox Church claimed the move would destroy an entire generation, especially the youth of Kerala.

The Congress-led UDF Opposition said there was something "mysterious" behind the decision being taken before the upcoming assembly elections. —*PTI*

IN BROAD DAYLIGHT

Pune women kidnapped in front of mother, brother

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

A 21-year-old woman in Maharashtra's Pune was allegedly kidnapped after attackers threw chilli powder into the eyes of her mother and brother on 17 February.

The incident occurred when the woman had been travelling on a two-wheeler with her family after visiting a local market in Bhigwan village.

A four-wheeler intercepted them, and the assailants allegedly blinded the family members with red chilli powder before forcibly dragging the woman into their vehicle and fleeing.

The police have registered a case against two brothers, Zaheer Haroon Shaikh and Ayan Haroon Shaikh, residents of Daund, under kidnapping charges. The accused and the victim knew each other and hailed from the same locality.

Police teams rushed to the spot, launched an investigation, and set up checkpoints across the district and adjoining areas. Search operations are ongoing to trace both the accused and the victim.

Authorities said preliminary findings revealed that the woman and one of the accused had been in contact for several days, with call and message records now part of the investigation. However, Pune Rural Police stated that all possible angles are being examined.

The incident triggered tension in the area, with members of some Hindu organisations staging protests outside the police station (in picture) and raising slogans.

The right-wing outfits protested late on the night on 17 February on the highway near Bhigwan by burning tree branches on the carriageway and demanded the arrest of the "kidnappers".

The agitation was later withdrawn after details emerged about prior contact between the victim and the accused. Security deployment was intensified in the area to maintain law and order as the probe in the case continues. —*PTI*

Blinkit booked for selling knives used in 2 murders

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Delhi Police has registered a case against instant delivery app, Blinkit, for allegedly selling illegal knives, linking their purchases to murder cases.

The police expressed concern over juveniles using knives in stabbing incidents in Delhi. The police conducted raids after such knives were used in two murders in West Delhi.

Police recovered 50 knives that were available for sale on the platform that violated government notifications.

A case was registered under relevant sections of the Arms Act after police found that certain knives were being sold through an online platform that violated prescribed specifications.

Police found that a 'Stanley knife' could be ordered through the delivery app. The knife was found to be manually foldable and measured 8 cm in length and 2.5 cm in width, making it an illegal arm under the law, police said. —*PTI*

What is illegal knife?

Knives having a blade length over 7.62 cm and over a width of 1.72 cm are termed Illegal. The penalty for possessing such knives can vary from fines to imprisonment.

RAMADAN IN GAZA CITY

Worshippers perform evening Tarawih prayer on the first night of the holy fasting month of Ramadan at the Great Omari Mosque, which was damaged during the Israel-Hamas war, in Gaza City. Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar during which Muslims observe fasting. It is also believed to be the month in which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad —PTI

DELHI'S RATION CARD RULES GO DIGITAL

In a major overhaul of the public distribution framework, only online applications for ration cards will be accepted in Delhi. Under the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2026, each member of the household will be required to furnish their Aadhaar numbers for it, officials said on Wednesday.

The applications received online will be scrutinised at the food supply officer level, and field visits will be conducted by them if needed, for verification of applicants. They may also raise queries regarding the details of the applicant.

All zonal assistant commissioners of the Food, Supplies and Consumer Affairs department of the Delhi government have been informed about a standard operating procedure (SOP).

The government is expected to soon start the process for filling up over 8 lakh ration card vacancies.

Delhi has a quota of around 72 lakh ration cards, and fresh applications are invited after vacancies are created either due to death, surrender or migration, officials said.

The government notified the Rules on 4 February, and the SOP prepared based on it lays down guidelines for processing fresh ration card applications.

The assistant commissioners have been directed to coordinate with the district magistrates concerned to implement the process of issuing ration cards as per the SOP and the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2026.

WOMEN ARE HOUSEHOLD HEADS, NOT MEN

The eldest female in a family (above 18 years of age) will be cited as the head of the household while furnishing ration card applications. If the age of the female of the family is below 18 years, the eldest male member will be indicated as head of the household until the female member attains the age of 18 years.

The applications will be submitted online through the e-district portal, by the head of the household along with a copy of the Aadhaar card of all the family members, it prescribes.

Proof of residence in Delhi, if Aadhaar address is different, a family income certificate issued by the Revenue Department, an undertaking of eligibility, and a copy of the electricity bill, will need to be submitted with the applications.

The Delhi government has raised the annual family income cap from earlier Rs 1 lakh to 1.2 lakh, in order to expand coverage of the public distribution system through ration cards, officials said.

The households having an annual family income of up to Rs 1.20 lakh will be considered eligible for a new ration card.

NO RATION CARD FOR LAND AND CAR OWNERS

However, those owning land or building in any A-E category colony, paying income tax, possessing four-wheelers (except one commercial vehicle for livehihood), having a government job or power connection above 2 KW, will not be issued ration cards, according to new rules.

LEVELS OF VERIFICATION

After proper scrutiny and ascertaining the eligibility of the applicant, the food supply officers will forward ration card applications to the assistant commissioners, who in turn will place them before a district-level committee headed by the district magistrate concerned. The committee will again scrutinise and evaluate applications according to the Delhi Food Security Rules, 2026, before accepting or rejecting them. The panel will also prioritise the approved applications, focusing on needy persons.

The committee will also maintain a waiting list of 20 per cent of the total vacancy, to be served on a first-come, first-served basis, according to the SOP. The total number of beneficiaries allowed for Delhi will be divided district-wise in proportion to the number of voters in the district. The voter basis would be switched to a census basis as and when the ongoing Census operations results are released for formal usage. —PTI

WILL THE POOR BENEFIT?

The mandatory online verification comes amid concerns of numerous people being denied access to the PDS food supply. For instance, in 2025, at least 10 lakh people in Gujarat went without ration in April, May and June after the state mandated online verification. This was attributed to glitches in the online process. Unreliable network connectivity in rural areas is another issue that continues to plague citizens. According to a government response in the Parliament on 25 March, 2025, 100 per cent of ration cards had been digitised, with Karnataka leading at 98.2 per cent. In what is now a norm for vulnerable people in India, poor implementation of such plans leads to the poor bearing the brunt to exercise their right to food. It is yet to be seen, if Delhi can overcome these obstacles to make the process transparent and beneficial for all.

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SALAR سالار

Redacted Epstein files hamper criminal nexus probe: UN

United Nations human rights experts have called for urgent, independent and impartial investigations into the so-called 'Epstein Files', warning that the alleged abuses detailed in the disclosures could amount to crimes against humanity under international law.

In a strongly worded statement issued on Monday, a group of UN experts said the material contains "disturbing and credible evidence of systematic and large-scale sexual abuse, trafficking and exploitation of women and girls".

According to the experts, the acts described in the files could constitute sexual slavery, reproductive violence, enforced disappearance, torture, inhuman and degrading treatment, and femicide. They said the alleged crimes were committed "against a backdrop of supremacist beliefs, racism, corruption, extreme misogyny, and the commodification and dehumanisation of women and girls from different parts of the world".

The experts described the files as "suggestive of the existence of a global criminal enterprise" that has "shocked the conscience of humanity" and exposed "terrifying implications of the level of impunity for such crimes".

"So grave is the scale, nature, systematic character, and transnational reach of these atrocities against women and girls, that a number of them may reasonably meet the legal threshold of crimes against humanity," they said.

Under international criminal law, crimes against humanity are defined as acts such as sexual slavery, rape, enforced prostitution, trafficking, persecution, torture or murder when committed as part of a widespread or systematic attack against a civilian population, with knowledge of the attack. The experts warned that the reported patterns in the Epstein material may meet this threshold and must be prosecuted in all competent national and international courts.

"All the allegations contained in the 'Epstein Files' are egregious in nature and require independent, thorough, and impartial investigation, as well as inquiries to determine how such crimes could have taken place for so long," they said.

The disclosure process is being carried out under the Epstein Files Transparency Act, signed into law on 19 November, 2025. On 30 January, 2026, following delays, the US Department of Justice released a major tranche of material, including more than three million pages of documents, 2,000 videos and 180,000 images.

Despite the scale of the disclosures, the UN experts warned of serious compliance failures and botched redactions that exposed sensitive victim information. In some cases, harm reportedly occurred before records were withdrawn.

Accountability to date has been limited, with only one close associate currently under investigation.

Under international human rights law, states are obliged to prevent, investigate and punish violence against women and girls, including acts committed by private actors. The experts said the "grave errors" in the release process underscore the urgent need for victim-centred standard operating procedures for disclosure and redaction to ensure no survivor suffers further harm.

They praised the courage and resilience of victims who have sought accountability at significant personal cost. A group of survivors recently met the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls. However, experts warned that failures to safeguard privacy have left victims vulnerable to retaliation and stigma. "The reluctance to fully disclose information or broaden investigations has left many survivors feeling retraumatised and subjected to what they describe as institutional gaslighting," the statement said.

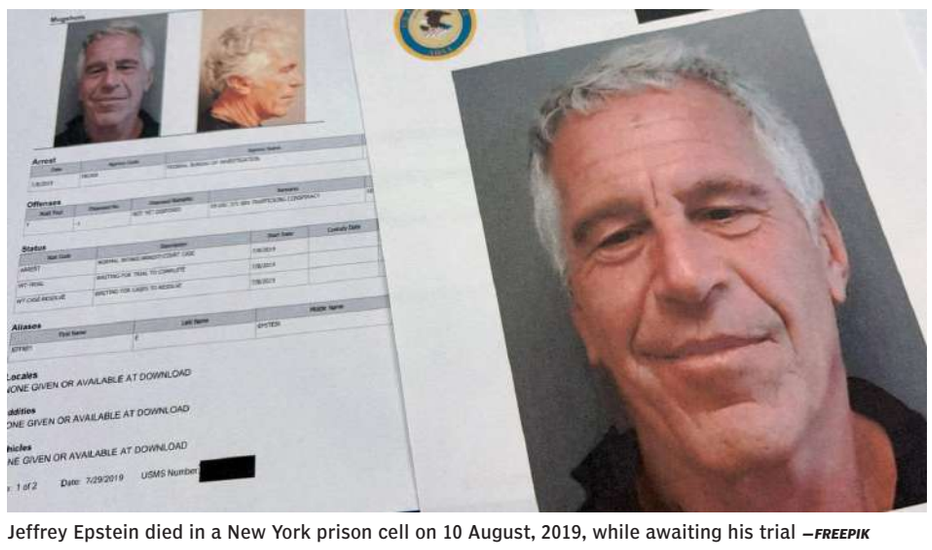
The experts urged US authorities to remedy the failures urgently, ensure full disclosure to understand the methods of the alleged criminal enterprise, provide full remedy and reparation for victims, and end impunity for perpetrators. They also called for statutes of limitation preventing prosecution of grave crimes attributed to the Epstein enterprise to be lifted.

"Any suggestion that it is time to move on from the 'Epstein files' is unacceptable. It represents a failure of responsibility towards victims," they said. "Resignations of implicated individuals alone are not an adequate substitute for criminal accountability."

The experts welcomed steps by some governments to investigate current and former officials and private individuals named in the files and called on other states to do the same. Failure to effectively investigate and prosecute those responsible, including where there has been complicity or acquiescence and jurisdiction exists, risks undermining legal frameworks designed to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls, they warned.

Jeffrey Epstein died in a New York prison cell on 10 August, 2019, while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges, having been denied bail. His death came more than a decade after he had been convicted of soliciting prostitution from a minor and registered as a sex offender.

The newly released files detail Epstein's interactions with numerous public figures, although inclusion does not imply wrongdoing. Among those referenced are Donald Trump, who is mentioned more than 38,000 times in material that includes FBI tips and records of past social and business ties. —UNHRC



Jeffrey Epstein died in a New York prison cell on 10 August, 2019, while awaiting his trial —FREEPIK

Iran-US nuclear talks may fail, but that doesn't make them futile

The latest rounds of nuclear talks between the US and Iran are going well enough for now, according to the steady drip of public statements from the main parties involved.

"I think they want to make a deal," said US President Donald Trump on the eve of the latest round of discussions held in Geneva on 17 February, 2026. Iran's foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, noted progress over the "guiding principles" of the talks.

Such optimism was similarly on display during initial talks in Oman earlier in the month.

But as someone who has researched nonproliferation and US national security for two decades and was involved in State Department nuclear diplomacy, I know we have been here before.

Optimism also existed in spring 2025, during five rounds of indirect talks that preceded the US bombing of Iran's nuclear infrastructure as part of a broader Israeli attack. Pointedly, Iran noted in February that a climate of mistrust created by that attack hangs over the efforts for a negotiated deal now.

RED LINES

But it is more than mistrust that will need to be overcome. The positions of both the US government and Iran have ossified since 8 May, 2018 – the date when the first Trump administration withdrew the US from the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal.

Iran continues to be unwilling to even discuss its ballistic missile program. This is a red line for them.

Yet the US continues to demand limits to Iran's ballistic missiles and the ending of Iran's support of proxy fighters in the region be included in the nuclear talks, in addition to having Iran fully abandon enriching uranium – including at the low civilian-use level agreed on under the 2015 nuclear deal.

The talks are taking place amid a wider trend toward the end of what can be called the "arms control era." The expiration of New START – which until 5 February, 2026, limited both the size and status of US and Russian nuclear weapons and maintained robust verification mechanisms.

MILITARY BRINKMANSHIP

Trump believes that Iran is in a weaker position than during his first term, following the largely successful Israeli attacks on Iran's regional proxies as well as on Iran itself. The strategic capabilities of Tehran's two main sponsored groups, Hamas and Hezbollah, are clearly diminished as a result of Israeli action.

—FREEPIK/PTI

The US may also still feel it has the upper hand following the June 2025 Operation Rising Lion, in which Iran's nuclear infrastructure was attacked in response to an International Atomic Energy Agency's report that Iran's stockpile of near-weapons grade enriched uranium surged by over 50 per cent in the spring.

The reopening of talks now also comes in the immediate aftermath of Iran's bloody crackdown on anti-government protests, leaving thousands of protesters dead.

The USS Abraham Lincoln carrier group was deployed near Iranian waters in January as a signal to the protesters of US support. US Secretary of State Marco Rubio has said that successful talks must include topics beyond Iran's nuclear program, including the "treatment of (its) own people."

Yet there is a danger that Washington may be overestimating its position.

NO RETURNING TO THE 2015 DEAL

Iran maintains that the talks must be confined only to guarantees about the civilian purpose of its nuclear program, not its missile program, its support of regional proxy groups or its own human rights abuses.

And that is incompatible with the US's long-held position.

This disagreement ultimately prevented the US and Iran from renewing the now-defunct 2015 political deal during the Biden administration. Signed by China, France, Germany, Russia, the UK, the US and Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) halted Iran's development of nuclear technology and stockpiling of nuclear material in exchange for lifting multiple international economic sanctions placed on Iran.

Ballistic missile technology and Iran's proxy support for regional militias were not included in the original agreement due to Iran's unwillingness to include those measures.

The parties to the Iran deal ultimately decided that a nuclear deal was better than the alternative of no deal at all.

There was a window for such a deal to be resumed in between the two Trump administrations. And the Biden administration publicly pledged to strengthen and renew the Obama-era nuclear deal in 2021.

But by then, Iran had significantly increased its nuclear technical capability during the four years that has passed since the JCPOA collapsed.

The window closed in 2022 after Iran removed all of the International Atomic Energy Agency's surveillance and monitoring under the deal.

US AND IRAN TALKS TODAY

Although most analysts doubt that Iran has developed the weaponisation knowledge necessary to build a nuclear bomb – estimates vary from several months to about two years due to the lack of access to and evidence on Iran's weaponisation research – Iran's technical advances reduce the value for the US government of returning to the 2015 deal. Iran's knowledge cannot be put back into Pandora's box.

But talks do not necessarily need an endpoint – in the shape of a deal – for them to have purpose.

With the increased military brinkmanship, talks could help the US and Iran step back from the edge, build trust and perhaps develop better political relations.

Both sides would benefit from this stabilization: Iran economically, from being reintegrated into the international system, and the US from a verifiable lengthening of the time it would take Iran to break out.

None of this is guaranteed.

The shape of a potential new deal is unclear. As time passes with no deal, both sides harden their negotiating starting points, making a deal less likely.

But even should the talks prove a failure, the effort to dampen the confrontational responses and heightening tensions would still be valuable in reducing the possibility of regional conflict. —*The Conversation*

Six rescued after California avalanche horror

SAN FRANCISCO, 18 FEB

Rescue crews fought through a fierce snowstorm in the mountains near Lake Tahoe to reach six backcountry skiers who survived an avalanche but were left trapped under snow and ice. Nine others from the 15-member group remain missing, according to the Nevada County Sheriff's Office.Two of the rescued skiers were rushed to a near to hospital, while the others were treated at the scene. Teams were dispatched to the Castle Peak area after a 911 call reported people buried. The group was on a guided three-day trek organised by Blackbird Mountain Guides. An avalanche warning had been issued as heavy snowfall and strong winds created extremely dangerous backcountry conditions.—*PTI*

— X/ANURA KUMARA

Lankan lawmakers scrap pensions after poll promise

COLOMBO, 18 FEB

Lawmakers in Sri Lanka have overwhelmingly voted to abolish parliamentary pensions, fulfilling a key election pledge by President Anura Kumara Dissanayake following public anger over the country's economic collapse. The bill passed with 154 votes in the 225-member Parliament, with only two opposed. Previously, MPs qualified for a lifetime pension after serving a single five-year term. The new law ends payments to those already receiving or eligible for the benefit. Justice Minister Harshana Nanayakkara said lawmakers had no moral right to pensions while the nation recovers from bankruptcy declared in 2022. The crisis triggered severe shortages and protests that forced former president Gotabaya Rajapaksa to resign. —*PTI*

Deportation of Palestinian student activist halted

NEW YORK, 18 FEB

An immigration judge has halted the deportation of Mohsen Mahdawi, a Palestinian graduate student at Columbia University who led protests against Israel and the war in Gaza. In a ruling made public on Tuesday, Judge Nina Froes dismissed the case, citing a procedural error by government lawyers who failed to properly certify a key document submitted as evidence. The decision is a setback for the administration of Donald Trump, which has sought to deport pro-Palestinian campus activists. The government may appeal. Mahdawi, a US permanent resident for a decade, was previously detained during a citizenship interview but later released. He is also pursuing a separate federal case challenging his detention. —*PTI*

Lunar New Year: 12 killed in China fireworks blast

BEIJING, 18 FEB

An explosion at a fireworks shop in Hubei province has killed 12 people, marking the second such incident during China's Lunar New Year celebrations. The blast occurred on Wednesday afternoon in the town of Xiangyang. Fire-fighters extinguished the blaze, according to state-run Xinhua News Agency. An investigation is under way to determine the cause. The tragedy follows a similar explosion on Sunday at a fireworks shop in Jiangsu province, which left eight people dead and two injured after fireworks were reportedly set off nearby. Fireworks are central to Spring Festival celebrations but are frequently linked to fatal accidents. Authorities have warned they remain a major safety risk during the holiday period. —*PTI*

US flies 50+ fighter jets to Middle East, Iran on alert

This is after Iran closed Strait of Hormuz to test missiles

TEHRAN, 18 FEB

The US deployed more than 50 fighter jets in the Middle East in the past 24 hours even as it pursues fresh nuclear talks with Iran in Geneva.

US officials described the move as a significant reinforcement of air and naval assets. According to Axios, which first reported the build-up, multiple F-22, F-35 and F-16 fighter jets, along with aerial refuelling tankers, were tracked heading towards the region, signalling preparations for sustained operations. A US official said the scale and speed of the deployment underlined Washington's readiness.

A second carrier strike group is also en route. The USS Gerald R Ford has left the Caribbean and is sailing across the mid-Atlantic towards the Middle East, accompanied by three guided-missile destroyers: USS Mahan, USS Bainbridge and USS Winston Churchill. Given its current position, the carrier is likely more than a week from waters near Iran. The USS Abraham Lincoln and other US assets were already deployed earlier this year.

The military surge comes as American and Iranian officials hold a second round of indirect nuclear negotiations in Geneva. A US official said "progress was made" but acknowledged "there are still a lot of details to discuss". Iranian representatives are expected to return within two weeks with detailed proposals to address gaps in positions.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi said an understanding had been reached on "the main principles", though unresolved issues remain. US Vice President JD Vance said Washington wanted diplomacy to succeed but that President Donald Trump had "all options on the table".

Tensions rose further after Iran temporarily shut parts of the Strait of Hormuz during live-fire exercises, testing missiles near a route that carries roughly 20 per cent of the world's oil. Tehran said the closure was for safety reasons and lasted several hours.

Iran insists it is not pursuing nuclear weapons and says it is open to verification. —*PTI*

Multiple F-22, F-35 and F-16 fighter jets, along with aerial refuelling tankers, were tracked heading towards the region —*REPRESENTATIVE*

- Describing the sustained operations, one US official commented that the scale and speed of the additional deployments underlined Washington's readiness.

'No advancements in Russia-Ukraine talks'

GENEVA, 18 FEB

Talks between Russia and Ukraine in Geneva ended on Wednesday without a breakthrough, as the war triggered by Moscow nears its fourth year.

The US-brokered negotiations in were the third round of direct discussions this year, following earlier meetings in Abu Dhabi that were described as constructive but inconclusive. The latest round came a day after a massive Russian strike involving 29 missiles and nearly 400 drones.

Vladimir Medinsky, an adviser to President Vladimir Putin and head of the Russian delegation, said the talks were "difficult but businesslike" and that another round would take place "in the near future". Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov cautioned it was "too early" to speak of outcomes,.Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy also described the discussions as "difficult", accusing Moscow of "trying to drag out negotiations that could already have reached the final stage". Rustem Umerov, leading Kyiv's delegation, said working groups were attempting to bridge political and military differences and clarify the "parameters and mechanisms" under discussion.

US envoy Steve Witkoff said Washington's yearlong push for peace had brought "meaningful progress", without elaborating.

Fighting continues along the roughly 1,250km front line. Hours after the first day of talks, Russian drones killed a woman and injured two young children in Zaporizhzhia. Overnight, Ukraine reported one ballistic missile and 126 long-range drones launched at its territory. Zelenskyy said prisoner exchanges were discussed and confirmed meetings with envoys from UK, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, insisting they're role is crucial. —*PTI*

Bangladesh's newly elected Prime Minister Tarique Rahmann appointed Khalilur Rahman as Foreign Minister—*WIKIPEDIA*

B'desh appoints 50-member Cabinet, Khalil named FM

DHAKA, 18 FEB

Bangladesh's newly elected Prime Minister Tarique Rahman on Wednesday assigned portfolios to the 50 members of his cabinet. Former security advisor Khalilur Rahman was appointed as Foreign Minister.

Tarique will handle the Cabinet Division, Defence Ministry, and Armed Forces.

Meanwhile, another senior BNP leader, who was previously a member of BNP's international affairs subcommittee, Shama Obaid, has been appointed as State Minister for Foreign Affairs.

BNP Secretary General Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir was given the responsibility of the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. The role of Finance and Planning Minister was assigned to BNP's Standing Committee member Amir Khasru Mahmud Chowdhury, and BNP Joint Secretary General Saluddin Ahmed was given the role of Minister of Home Affairs.

Tarique was sworn in as Prime Minister after the BNP secured 209 of the 297 directly elected seats. Meanwhile, Jamaat-e-Islami, alongside an 11-party alliance, formed the opposition with 68 seats.

India's Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri held a courtesy meeting with opposition leader Shafiqur Rahman of Jamaat-e-Islami.

Misri congratulated him on his new role and reiterated India's continued, people-centric support for Bangladesh. Rahman underscored the shared civilisational links between the two countries and voiced hope for closer bilateral ties, India's mission in Dhaka said on X.

Ahead of the elections, Shafiqur had said his party favoured good relations with India. —*Agencies*

New Mexico probes Epstein's Zorro Ranch

SANTA FE, 18 FEB

New Mexico state legislators launched an investigation on Tuesday into a secluded desert ranch where late financier and sex offender Jeffrey Epstein once entertained guests. The probe will determine if local authorities looked the other way.

A bipartisan, four-member panel of state House representatives are investigating allegations that the ranch may have been used for sex trafficking. They will probe why Epstein was not registered as a sex offender after pleading guilty in 2008 to soliciting prostitution from a minor girl and whether there was corruption among public officials.

Epstein purchased the sprawling Zorro Ranch in New Mexico in 1993 from former Democratic Gov Bruce King and built a 2,480sqm hilltop mansion. The property was sold by Epstein's estate in 2023, with proceeds going to creditors.

Epstein reportedly killed himself in a Manhattan jail while awaiting trial in 2019.

HYATT BOARD MEMBER STEPS DOWN

Hotel magnate Thomas Pritzker will step down as the executive chairman of Hyatt Hotels after details of his affiliation with Epstein were revealed in the files.

Pritzker said he deeply regrets his association with Epstein and his girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell, who is serving a 20-year sentence for sex trafficking.

Emails between Pritzker and Epstein released by the US Department of Justice detailed their dinner meet ups and continued correspondence even after Epstein pleaded guilty in 2008. —*Agencies*

Gunman nabbed while running to US Capitol

US Capitol Police arrested an 18-year-old man on Tuesday after he ran from his vehicle towards the west side of the Capitol, armed with a shotgun. Chief Michael Sullivan said the unidentified man parked a Mercedes SUV near the Capitol, got out and began running at the building when officers intercepted him and ordered him to the ground. The gunman was wearing a tactical vest,-gloves, a Kevlar helmet and gas mask in the vehicle. The shotgun was loaded and he had additional rounds on him. His motive is under investigation. —PTI

Trump family files for airport name trademark

NEW YORK, 18 FEB

The Trump family has filed applications with the US Patent and Trademark Office seeking exclusive rights to use the name.

The filings cover airports and associated items, from shuttle buses to umbrellas, amid debate over renaming Palm Beach Intl Airport and Dulles International Airport.

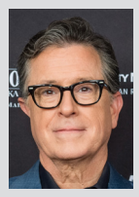
Citing the Trump name as the "most infringed trademark in the world," the Trump firm filed for airport trademark rights following a Florida renaming bill, claiming the move is for brand protection not profit.

"To be clear, the President and family will not receive any financial consideration from the proposed airport renaming," they said

Trademark lawyer Josh Gerben called the filings "completely unprecedented". Former presidents had waited years for airport honours. —*PTI*

CBS blocks Texas Dems Senate candidate interview: Colbert

Late-night host **Stephen Colbert** said his interview with Democratic Texas Senate candidate James Talarico was pulled from The Late Show with Stephen Colbert after CBS lawyers warned it could breach Fed Communications Commission (FCC) guidance. "We were told unequivocally that we could not have him on the broadcast," Colbert said. CBS said the show received legal guidance that it "could trigger the FCC equal-time rule". The 15 minute interview was posted online as Texas' early voting began. —PTI



Philippines VP seeks 2028 presidency, faces impeachment

MANILA, 18 FEB

The Philippines Vice President Sara Duterte announced her 2028 presidential bid on Wednesday, a move that must navigate active impeachment efforts in Congress and criminal complaints.

The impeachment bids filed this month focus on Sara's alleged misuse of USD 10.3 million in confidential funds during her time as Vice President and Education Secretary. Additional filings accuse her of amassing unexplained personal wealth.

Although the House of Representatives previously voted to impeach Sara by transmitting the case to the Senate, the Supreme Court later nullified it.

Despite forming an alliance as running mates in the 2022 elections, Sara, during her televised announcement, levied allegations of corruption and misrule against President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

Their rapport fell apart when Sara and her family blamed Marcos for the detention of her father, former president Rodrigo Duterte, who faces a potential trial for crimes against humanity at the International Criminal Court over his deadly anti-drugs crackdown.

Sara also accused Marcos of reneging on his campaign promises. Afterwhich, she announced her presidential bid. —*PTI*

Pak oppn ends sit-in over Imran's health concerns

ISLAMABAD, 18 FEB

Pakistan's opposition alliance has ended its sit-in in the country's capital, demanding proper treatment for jailed former prime minister Imran Khan.

The Tehreek-e-Tahafuz-i-Ayin-in-Pakistan (TTAP), including Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaf (PTI), began protests on Friday at Parliament and the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa House, led by Achakzai and Afridi.

The group claimed to have achieved its goal of highlighting Khan's health issues.

A medical report from doctors visiting Khan on Sunday confirmed he has lost 85 per cent of his vision in his right eye, following examining for central retinal vein occlusion.

The alliance cited the start of Ramadan as a reason to end protests but pledged future measures.

Afridi announced the formation of a "Release Force" whose goal it is to secure Khan's release, aiming for a peaceful struggle. —*PTI*

Takaichi re-elected as Japan's PM; targets hard-right policy shift

TOKYO, 18 FEB

Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi was reappointed on Wednesday to form her second Cabinet following a landslide victory. She intends to use this leverage to shift the policies toward a hard-right agenda.

With two-thirds control in the Lower House, Takaichi's party can dominate top posts and push through bills rejected by the Upper House and Chamber.

Takaichi wants to bolster Japan's military and arms sales, tighten immigration policies, push male-only imperial succession rules and preserve a criticised tradition that pressures women into abandoning their surnames.

However, Takaichi's ambition to revise the US-drafted pacifist Constitution may have to be deferred for now, as she faces pressure to deal with rising prices, declining population and military security concerns.

To address rising prices and sluggish wages, she proposes a two-year sales tax cut on food products to ease household living costs. Experts caution that her liberal fiscal policy could drive up prices and delay progress on trimming Japan's huge national debt.

Takaichi backs maintaining male-only succession in Japan's imperial family and opposes legalising same-sex marriage. She supports expanding the use of maiden names as legal aliases. —*PTI*

ASSAULT ON ENVIRONMENT

Gates-backed Breakthrough Energy halts funds for green projects, fires staff

WASHINGTON, 18 FEB

Breakthrough Energy, a climate investment group backed by Bill Gates, has halted new investments from its flagship fund and laid off staff. This comes after US President Donald Trump's ended the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) ability to fight climate change. The EPA's bedrock finding that greenhouse gases threaten human survival was overturned.

Launched in 2021, the Catalyst fund raised more than USD 1 billion to finance climate projects targeting demonstration and large-scale deployment of emerging technologies that struggle to attract funding, Bloomberg reported. After backing 10 startups and spending "hundreds of millions of dollars," the organisation has suspended new funds, a spokesperson confirmed, as reported by Axios.

Catalyst will now focus on managing and supporting its existing portfolio. There are no immediate plans to raise additional capital, and some staff — including former head Mario Fernandez — have been laid off as part of what the group described as an "evolution" requiring a smaller team.

The move reflects broader challenges for climate investors as Trump rolls back climate policies, reversing funding linked to the Inflation Reduction Act introduced under Joe Biden.

In January, Gates warned that markets alone cannot solve climate change and called for stronger government backing. His venture arm, Breakthrough Energy Ventures, has funded about 150 startups, with 30 to 40 failures. "There'll be lots of dead ends," Gates said last year. —*Agencies*

PHOTO: PTI

Silver rebounds to ₹2.46L/kg; Gold falls to ₹1.56L/10g

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Snapping a three-day losing streak, silver prices rebounded by Rs 1,000 to Rs 2.46 lakh per kg in the national capital on Wednesday, tracking strong trends in the international markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association. Gold of 99.9 per cent purity, however, fell by Rs 300 to Rs 1,56,700 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes). "Silver traded with mild gains on Wednesday, stabilising after recent sharp declines as bargain buying emerged at lower levels," Gaurav Garg, Research Analyst at Lemonn Markets Desk, said.In the international market, spot silver gained USD 2.06, or 3 per cent, to USD 75.60 per ounce, and gold rose nearly 1 per cent to USD 4,918.64 per ounce. *—PTI*

Rupee rises 4P to close at 90.68 against USD

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

The rupee rose 4 paise to close at 90.68 against the US dollar on Wednesday, driven by inflow of foreign funds and positive domestic equity markets. However, higher global crude oil prices and a strengthening greenback capped sharp gains in the local unit, forex traders said. At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 90.60 against the US dollar. It traded in a narrow range of 90.59-90.71 before settling at 90.68 against the greenback, higher by 4 paise from its previous closing level. The rupee gained 2 paise to settle at 90.72 against the US dollar on Tuesday. Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.08 per cent higher at 97.22. *—PTI*

OpenAI and Indian Universities to develop AI talent

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

OpenAI announced collaborations with leading Indian universities, including IIT Delhi, IIM Ahmedabad, AIIMS New Delhi, Manipal Academy of Higher Education, UPES, and Pearl Academy, to embed AI across education sectors. The initiative aims to support over 1 lakh students, faculty, and staff by providing enterprise-grade ChatGPT Edu access, structured onboarding, and responsible-use frameworks. AI will be integrated into core academic workflows, including prompting, analytics, coding, and research, with support for hackathons and industry events. IIM Ahmedabad and Manipal will deploy OpenAI certifications for AI skills, while partnerships with ed-tech platforms will launch specialised courses. *—PTI*

B'luru, Delhi-NCR, Mumbai leading in AI hiring: CBRE

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Nearly 70 per cent of Artificial Intelligence (AI) job openings listed on Naukri.com is concentrated in Bengaluru, Delhi-NCR and Mumbai, according to a study by CBRE. The analysis, based on over 64,500 active AI-tagged vacancies as of December 2025, shows Bengaluru leading with 25.4 per cent, followed by Delhi-NCR at 24.8 per cent and Mumbai at 19.2 per cent. Hyderabad accounts for 12.5 per cent, Pune 9.6 per cent, Chennai 6.4 per cent and Kolkata 2.1 per cent. Key hiring domains include software engineering, data science and analytics, and customer services. CBRE said Bengaluru's dominance is driven by Global Capability Centres, while Delhi-NCR's demand comes from consulting, fintech, and healthcare and public sector projects. *—PTI*

Nvidia says India must upgrade its $1.2B AI investment

L&T and Nvidia announced a joint venture to build a gigawatt-scale AI factory

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

India needs to scale up investment in Artificial Intelligence from the current USD 1.2 billion to match the global levels and the Budget announcement of 20-year tax holiday to foreign companies offers "foundational infrastructure" for expanding AI, a senior Nvidia official said on Wednesday.

Shanker Trivedi, Senior Vice President, Enterprise Business at Nvidia, said of the 2,000 global corporations, 1,800 have a major global capability centre in India currently employing over 2 million people, shortly to grow to 3 million.

In the Union Budget 2026-27, a tax holiday of 20 years up to 2047 was announced to any foreign company that procures data centre services in India, allaying fears of their global income being taxed by Indian authorities.

Meanwhile, engineering major Larsen & Toubro (L&T) announced a proposed joint venture with Nvidia, to build sovereign, gigawatt-scale AI factory infrastructure, aiming to position India as a global AI powerhouse.

The partnership targets India's enterprises, policymakers, industry leaders, global offtakers and analysts seeking production-grade AI capacity amid the country's digital and industrial transformation.

It combines L&T's expertise in engineering, infrastructure development and execution with Nvidia's AI infrastructure, including GPUs, CPUs, networking, accelerated storage platforms, the Nvidia AI Enterprise software stack and reference architectures for rapid, secure AI adoption.

Additionally, the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) announced its collaboration with Nvidia to scale and advance its sovereign AI model capabilities purpose-built for India's payments ecosystem. *—PTI*

Caught a bug: Nvidia MD on CEO'S absence

Nvidia South Asia MD Vishal Dhupar explained CEO Jensen Huang's absence at the India AI Impact Summit, stating he was unwell after weeks of travel. Dhupar said, "Jensen has travelled for three straight weeks, he caught a bug, he is under the weather." He added that Huang deputed Jay Puri to lead the delegation. *—PTI*

Not UN's role to regulate AI, says António Guterres

António Guterres has said the UN will not regulate AI but will host an annual global dialogue to build consensus on its risks and benefits. Ahead of the India AI Impact Summit, he highlighted a new 40-member scientific panel and proposed a $3 billion fund to support developing countries in AI capacity building. *—PTI*

Qualcomm to invest $150M in India's AI fund

Global chip major Qualcomm Incorporated plans to invest up to USD 150 million, or about Rs 1,360 cror, to support India's rapidly expanding technology and AI startup ecosystem, the company said on Wednesday. The investments will be deployed through Qualcomm Ventures and will be made in startups across all stages, with a particular focus on AI for automotive, IoT, robotics, and mobile, the company said in a statement. The announcement coincides with Qualcomm CEO Cristiano Amon's participation in the India AI Impact Summit in New Delhi. *—PTI*

MakeMyTrip & OpenAI partner for AI-led travel

NASDAQ-listed travel tech major MakeMyTrip on Wednesday announced it will collaborate with OpenAI to deepen AI-led travel discovery and capture high-intent travel queries, aimed at translating them into bookable outcomes. MakeMyTrip will use OpenAI's APIs (application programming interfaces) to power new artificial intelligence features in its app, enabling travellers to move from conversational inspiration to booking within the MakeMyTrip's 'Myra' chatbot interface. *—PTI*

—WIKIPEDIA

Microsoft to invest $50B in expanding Global South's AI

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Microsoft on Wednesday said it is on pace to invest USD 50 billion by the end of the decade to expand artificial intelligence access across the Global South, as it warned that AI adoption in the Global North is roughly twice that of the Global South and the gap is widening.

Announcing the plan at the India AI Impact Summit, the tech giant's vice chair and president Brad Smith and vice president and chief responsible AI officer Natasha Crampton said urgent action is needed to prevent a growing AI divide from deepening global economic disparities.

According to Microsoft's latest AI Diffusion Report, uneven adoption of AI risks limiting economic growth and opportunity in developing regions. The $50 billion commitment will be deployed through a five-part programme focused on infrastructure, skilling, multilingual AI development, local innovation and measurement of AI adoption.

Microsoft said it invested more than $8 billion in datacentre infrastructure serving the Global South in its last fiscal year, including in India, Mexico and countries across Africa, South America, Southeast Asia and the Middle East. *—PTI*

Become highly proficient with AI tools, ... over the next 10 years, such skills would almost make them superpowered across fields ranging from business to science

—Demis Hassabis, Google DeepMind CEO

Artificial Intelligence is a responsible enabler designed to augment human capability and not a replacement for expertise

—Jurgen Westermeier, Airbus India Chief

Google, Atal Labs bring AI to 10K+ schools

>>>CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Google is also partnering with Atal Tinkering Labs to bring generative AI assistance to over 10,000 Indian schools and 11 million students, with a focus on robotics and coding in classrooms.

On research and innovation, Google has launched a USD 30-million AI for Science Impact Challenge to support global researchers using AI to drive the next generation of scientific breakthroughs.

Pichai highlighted Google's collaborations with Indian government bodies and institutions such as IITs to ensure AI benefits communities effectively.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi with CEO of Google Sundar Pichai during a meeting, *—PTI*

Indian users are among the highest adopters of voice and visual search, Pichai noted, and Google plans to introduce an enhanced model enabling live search through voice and camera in local languages.

The Gemini app, a personal AI assistant, is also expanding rapidly, with India among its largest markets and support in ten languages.

Pichai described AI as one of the most powerful tools to solve problems and improve lives at a planetary scale, from making diseases more detectable and treatable to enhancing community resilience and access to education.

He said India ranks among the highest globally for AI adoption and optimism.

"Google has been investing in AI for over a decade because we see it as the most important way to advance our mission, reimagining the products people use every day," he said.

AI overviews now provide AI-generated summaries at the top of Google search results, available in 35 new languages across 200 countries and territories.

AI overviews now provide AI-generated summaries at the top of Google search results, available in 35 new languages across 200 countries and territories.

—Salar News

INDIA COULD SURPASS US IN AI ADOPTION: ZOHO CO-FOUNDER

Zoho's Co-founder **Sridhar Vembu** believes India may be quicker than America in adopting AI within ten years, driven by a youthful and optimistic population. He said, "In 10 years, India might be faster in terms of AI adoption than even America," citing the example of fibre optics, which is widespread in India despite US investments. Vembu explained, "We have a very youthful optimistic population. We don't have a population that is very sceptical," which benefits AI acceptance. *—PTI*

INDIA-UK OFFSHORE WIND TASKFORCE OFFICIALLY LAUNCHED

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Union New and Renewable Energy Minister Pralhad Joshi on Wednesday said India's non-fossil fuel electricity capacity has surpassed 272 GW, including over 141 GW of solar and 55 GW of wind power, at the launch of the India-UK Offshore Wind Taskforce.

The initiative aligns with India's target of 500 GW of renewable energy by 2030 and net-zero emissions by 2070. UK Deputy Prime Minister David Lammy and British High Commissioner Lindy Cameron were present.

Joshi said India added more than 35 GW of solar and 4.61 GW of wind capacity this financial year and achieved 50 per cent installed power capacity from non-fossil sources five years ahead of its climate commitment.

Promising offshore wind zones have been identified off Gujarat and Tamil Nadu, with plans for 10 GW transmission capacities. *—PTI*

Mkts close higher on fag-end buying

MUMBAI, 18 FEB

Benchmark equity indices Sensex and Nifty rose for the third straight session on Wednesday, driven by last-hour buying in bank, metal, and FMCG shares.

The 30-share BSE Sensex jumped 283.29 points, or 0.34 per cent, to settle at 83,734.25 in a volatile trade. During the day, it touched an intraday high of 83,770.05.

The 50-share NSE Nifty gained 93.95 points, or 0.37 per cent, to close at 25,819.35.

Among the Sensex firms, Tata Steel, ITC, Axis Bank, Reliance Industries, Mahindra & Mahindra, Larsen & Toubro, Bajaj Finance, Bajaj Finserv, Hindustan Unilever, State Bank of India, UltraTech Cement, Trent, Sun Pharmaceuticals, and Kotak Mahindra Bank were the major gainers.

On the other hand, Eternal, Tech Mahindra, Infosys, HCL Technologies, Adani Ports, Tata Consultancy Services, IndiGo, Asian Paints, Maruti Suzuki India PowerGrid and HDFC Bank were the laggards.

Broader indices also traded firm, with the BSE Smallcap Select Index rising 1.02 per cent and the Midcap Select Index gaining 0.40 per cent.

A total of 2,237 stocks advanced, while 1,955 declined and 191 remained unchanged on the BSE.

On Tuesday, the 30-share BSE Sensex climbed 173.81 points to close at 83,450.96. The 50-share NSE Nifty advanced 42.65 points to settle at 25,725.40. *—PTI*

Valeo to invest €200M in India's 'Elevate 2028' plan

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

French car parts maker Valeo on Wednesday said it plans to invest more than 200 million euros in India in the coming years as part of its 'Elevate 2028' strategic plan to significantly expand its industrial footprint in India. These investments will enable Valeo to triple sales in India to around 700 million euro by 2028 from 220 million euro in 2024 and prepare for the next step of high growth. *—PTI*

'ADDICTIVE FOR CHILDREN'

Mark set to testify in social media trial

LOS ANGELES, 18 FEB

- Meta Platforms and Google's YouTube are the two remaining defendants in the case, which TikTok and Snap have settled.

Mark Zuckerberg will testify in an unprecedented social media trial that questions whether Meta's platforms deliberately addict and harm children.

Meta's CEO is expected to answer tough questions on Wednesday from attorneys representing a now 20-year-old woman identified by the initials KGM, who claims her early use of social media addicted her to the technology and exacerbated depression and suicidal thoughts.

Meta Platforms and Google's YouTube are the two remaining defendants in the case, which TikTok and Snap have settled.

Zuckerberg has testified in other trials and answered questions from Congress about youth safety on Meta's platforms, and he apologised to families at that hearing whose lives had been upended by tragedies they believed were because of social media.

This trial, though, marks the first time Zuckerberg will answer similar questions in front of a jury and, again, bereaved parents are expected to be in the limited courtroom seats available to the public.

The case, along with two others, has been selected as a bellwether trial, meaning its outcome could impact how thousands of similar lawsuits against social media companies would play out.

A Meta spokesperson said the company strongly disagrees with the allegations in the lawsuit and said they are "confident the evidence will show our longstanding commitment to supporting young people."

Zuckerberg's testimony comes a week after that of Adam Mosseri, the head of Meta's Instagram, who said in the courtroom that he disagrees with the idea that people can be clinically addicted to social media platforms. *—PTI*

Warner reopens takeover talks with Paramount

NEW YORK, 18 FEB

Warner Bros Discovery is briefly reopening takeover talks with Skydance-owned Paramount to hear the company's "best and final" offer, after receiving a seven-day waiver from Netflix, while continuing to back its studio and streaming deal with the latter.

In a regulatory filing, Warner said the waiver would allow discussions on unresolved "deficiencies" and "clarify certain terms" of Paramount's latest bid. However, its board is still recommending shareholders support the proposed merger with Netflix, with a special meeting scheduled for 20 March.

Netflix said it was confident its transaction "provides superior value and certainty" but acknowledged "the ongoing distraction for WBD stockholders and the broader entertainment industry caused by PSKY's antics," adding it had granted the waiver to "finally resolve this matter."

Paramount described the move as "unusual" but said it was "nonetheless prepared to engage in good faith and constructive discussions," while maintaining its USD 30 per share tender offer and pursuing a proxy fight.

Shares of Warner rose over 3 per cent. *—PTI*

South Africa finish group stage with an all-win record

Sahibzada ton, bowlers lift Pakistan into Super Eights

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

Dewald Brevis warmed up nicely with some monstrous sixes as South Africa hardly broke sweat during a walk-in-the-park six-wicket victory over the United Arab Emirates in their final group league fixture of the T20 World Cup here on Wednesday.

Chasing a target of 123, the Proteas romped home in 13.1 overs with Aiden Markram smashing 28 off 11 balls to set the stage for young Brevis, who also helped himself to a 36 off 25 balls. Ryan Rickleton hit some lusty sixes to get 30 off 16 balls in an all-round effort.

South Africa's Dewald Brevis plays a shot at Arun Jaitley Stadium in New Delhi –PTI

Earlier, young Alishan Sharafu led a charmed life with double reprieves, but Anrich Nortje, playing his first match of the tournament, bowled quickly and straight to restrict the UAE to 122 for 6 in the stipulated 20 overs.

South Africa 123 for 4 (Brevis 36, Rickelton 30, Arfan 1-16) beat UAE 122 for 6 (Sharafu 45, Bosch 3-12, Nortje 2-28) by six wickets

Pakistan rode on Sahibzada Farhan's scintillating maiden hundred and their spinners' excellent display to beat Namibia by a handsome margin of 102 runs and enter the Super Eights of the T20 World Cup here on Wednesday.

Batting first, Pakistan posted a formidable 199 for three in their must-win game.

Farhan, who needed just 20 deliveries to move from 50 to 100, ended on 100 not out off 58 balls, becoming only the second player from Pakistan to score a century in the tournament after Ahmed Shehzad's ton against Bangladesh in 2014 at Mirpur.

In all, Farhan hit 11 boundaries and four sixes while adding 67 runs with skipper Salman Agha (38 off 23 balls) and 81 runs with Shadab Khan (36 not out off 22 balls).

In reply, Namibia were all out for 97 in 17.3 overs with mystery spinner Usman Tariq (4/16 in 3.3 overs) and leg-spinner Shadab Khan (3/19 in 4 overs) leading Pakistan's charge with the ball, picking up four and three wickets respectively. Salman Mirza and Mohammad Nawaz chipped in with a wicket each as Namibia fared miserably in the chase to finish their campaign winless after four outings. With this win, Pakistan has also ensured its qualification to the next edition of the T20 World Cup, scheduled to be co-hosted by Australia and New Zealand in 2028.

This is also Pakistan's biggest margin of victory in the T20 showpiece.

Seeking to recover from the heavy defeat to traditional rivals India, Pakistan strengthened their batting with the inclusion of Khawaja Nafay in the middle order while leaving out the woefully out-of-sorts pacer Shaheen Shah Afridi.

While the team did get the occasional boundaries, their approach was far from ideal as they resorted to defensive batting, which pretty much explained why they were 55 for one after overs at the Sinhalese Sports Club.

Pakistan 199 for 3 (Farhan 100*, Agha 38, Brassell 2-38) beat Namibia 97 (Steenkamp 23, Tariq 4-16, Shadab 3-19) by 102 runs. —*PTI*

Munsey breaches Code of Conduct against Nepal

Scotland opener George Munsey has been reprimanded and handed one demerit point for throwing his helmet onto the advertising boards during his side's Group C T20 World Cup match against Nepal. Munsey was found to have breached Article 2.2 of the ICC Code of Conduct for Players and Player Support Personnel, which relates to abuse of cricket equipment or ground equipment during an international match. One demerit point has been added to his disciplinary record.

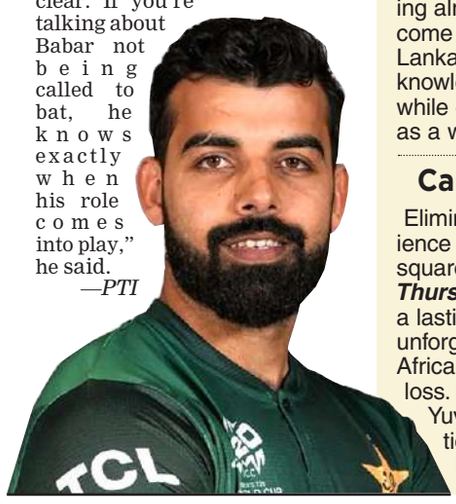
Can't take things to heart: Shadab on Babar, Shaheen's snub

COLOMBO, 18 FEB

Players cannot take things to heart as everyone is trying to win matches for Pakistan, said all-rounder Shadab Khan after Babar Azam was not sent in to bat against Namibia and Shaheen Shah Afridi was dropped from the playing XI.

Pakistan, which had suffered a crushing loss to India, qualified for the T20 World Cup Super Eights with a massive 102-run victory over Namibia here on Wednesday."As a professional, you can't take these things to heart. The team's environment and messages are very clear, so it's not a problem for any player. Everyone is trying to help the team win," Shadab told reporters after the match."The Super Eights will be tough. There will be pressure games.

At the end of the day, you can only control certain things, so you should focus on controlling those."Prodded further on why Babar wasn't sent in to bat and if there was any issue with Pakistan's selection calls, Shadab said it wasn't a case of experimentation."Do you really think Pakistan experiments that much? I don't think so. Our messages are very clear. If you're talking about Babar not being called to bat, he knows exactly when his role comes into play," he said. —*PTI*



ICC T20 WC MATCHES TOMORROW

Clinical WI eye final tune-up before Super Eights; Italy seek parting upset

Two-time champions West Indies will look to fine-tune their combination and deliver yet another clinical performance when they take on spirited debutants Italy in their final Group C match of the T20 World Cup, here on ***Thursday 11 am***.Though the Caribbean side has slumped since its second and last T20 World Cup triumph at this very venue a decade ago, it is beginning to peak at the right time in this edition of the global showpiece. As the business end approaches, the Darren Sammy-coached outfit appears to be finding rhythm for a demanding Super Eights schedule. West Indies will face Zimbabwe in Mumbai on 23 February, South Africa in Ahmedabad on 26 February, before returning here for a marquee clash against co-hosts and title favourites India on 1 March.

Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe to battle for group bragging rights

Surprise package Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka will battle for bragging rights when they clash in a compelling T20 World Cup fixture here on ***Thursday 3 pm***, with both teams having already secured their spots in the Super 8s. The outcome of this match will determine the group topper.Sri Lanka has emerged as a strong contender, leveraging their knowledge of local conditions to defeat Oman and Ireland, while crushing Australia by eight wickets to establish itself as a well-rounded side with the potential to go all the way.

Canada, Afghan face off in dead rubber

Eliminated despite captivating the crowds with their resilience and spirited play, Afghanistan and Canada will square off in their final T20 World Cup fixture here on ***Thursday 7 pm***, seeking to finish on a high note and leave a lasting impression. Afghanistan wowed fans during the unforgettable double Super Over thriller against South Africa in Ahmedabad, where they suffered a heartbreaking loss. Canada was fuelled by the determination of teenager Yuvraj Samra, who captured the cricketing world's attention with his remarkable feat in Chennai, where he became the youngest ever to score a T20 century.

–PTI

Court orders fresh elections in EFI

NEW DELHI, 18 FEB

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday ordered fresh elections in the Equestrian Federation of India (EFI) and also called for the constitution of an independent ad-hoc administrative committee to oversee its functioning. The matter was listed at Item No. 4 before Court 14 presided over by Justice Kaurav, who was hearing an application filed by the Union of India seeking the appointment of an ad-hoc administrative committee to administer the affairs of the EFI. The court was informed that the existing Executive Committee had been reinstated in view of the Paris Olympics 2024 and that its tenure had since expired.—*PTI*

/@DUBAIOPEN

Anisimova and Andreeva set up for last eight clash

QATAR, 18 FEB

Elena Rybakina was the latest player to join the exodus at the Dubai Open on Wednesday as she retired from her match, while Amanda Anisimova and Mirra Andreeva both won to set up a quarterfinal meeting. Australian Open champion and top seed Rybakina was forced to call it a day in her last-16 match due to gastrointestinal issues at the start of the third set against Croatian lucky loser Antonia Ruzic. The Kazakh joins other high-profile players, including the world's top two, Aryna Sabalenka and Iga Swiatek, as well as Victoria Mboko and Barbora Krejcikova, in retiring or withdrawing from the WTA 1000 event. Ruzic, who in the first round eliminated 2021 US Open winner Emma Raducanu, has reached the first WTA 1000 quarter-final of her career. —*PTI*

Mikaela Shiffrin wins slalom gold in emphatic style

NAVI MUMBAI, 18 FEB

American star Mikaela Shiffrin cemented her place among the greats of alpine skiing as she won Olympic slalom gold in emphatic fashion. Twelve years on from winning the title in Sochi aged 18, Shiffrin stormed to victory with an overall time of 1:39:10, an extraordinary 1.50 seconds ahead of second place to become a three-time Olympic champion.

The 30-year-old put herself in pole position with a time of 47.13secs in the first run at Olimpia delle Tofane, a gap of 0.82secs to second-place Lena Duerr.The German was the only skier to finish within one second of Shiffrin, but she straddled the first gate on her second run to put herself out of medal contention.That left Shiffrin with what was ultimately an exhibition run to take gold,d and she completed the run in 51.97 seconds."Today I showed up for skiing.

I wanted to have two runs with really strong slalom skiing. Now to be through that is a little bit challenging to process," she said."In the end, today, showing up that was the thing I wanted most. More than the medal.

Now, to also get to have a medal is unbelievable."Switzerland's Camille Rast claimed silver while Sweden's Anna Swenn Larsson took bronze. Seven-time world champion Shiffrin appeared to be in disbelief as she initially crossed the line but eventually crouched on her skis with her head in her hands before fist-pumping towards the crowd. Although the margin of victory this time was significant, things had not gone to plan for her until now in Cortina. —*PTI*

Kiran, Sonam among shooters confirmed for Lakshya Cup

NAVI MUMBAI, 18 FEB

A Top-ranked Indian air rifle shooters, including Kiran Jadhav and Sonam Maskar, will participate in the 16th edition of the Lakshya Cup to be held here on February 21 and 22. The other confirmed shooters in the event are reigning National Games champion and junior world champion Parth Mane, former national champion Rajshree Sancheti, and Ojasvi Thakur, the gold medallist in the Asian Championships. The tournament, conceptualised by former Olympian Suma Shirur, will be held at the Lakshya Shooting Club. —*PTI*

Prestianni denies racially insulting Vinicius Junior

MADRID, 18 FEB

Benfica player Gianluca Prestianni has denied racially insulting Real Madrid forward Vinícius Júnior.

"I have never been racist with anyone, and I regret the threats that I received from Real Madrid players," the 20-year-old Argentina forward said on X. The Champions League playoff game at Benfica's Stadium of Light was halted for nearly 10 minutes on Tuesday after the referee initiated the anti-racism protocol.

Benfica showed support for Prestianni on Wednesday, with the Portuguese club claiming that Madrid players who said they heard the insult were too far away.

Benfica fans had reacted angrily to Vinícius celebrating his 50th-minute goal by dancing by the corner flag, throwing bottles and other objects toward the Madrid players. Prestianni then confronted Vinícius and said something while covering his mouth with his jersey.Vinícius said Prestianni racially insulted him during the game, which Madrid won 1-0. Madrid hosts the second leg on Feb. 25 with the overall winner advancing to the round of 16 in European club soccer's top competition. —*PTI*

RANJI TROPHY

J&K make history, enter final for first time in 67 years

KALYANI, 18 FEB

–PTI

Jammu and Kashmir scripted history by reaching the Ranji Trophy finals for the first time in their 67-year history, defeating two-time former champions Bengal by six wickets on day four of the semifinal here on Wednesday.

Set a below-par target of 126 by the home side, they chased it down in 34.4 overs, with Vanshaj Sharma (43 not out) and Abdul Samad (30 not out) steering them past the finish line.

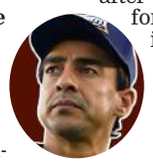
This was after pace spearhead Auqib Nabi had wreaked havoc by taking nine wickets in the match to destroy the host side's chances.

Auqib Nabi's stunning nine-wicket match haul and their IPL star Abdul Samad's fearless strokeplay ensured that the side once labelled "perennial underachievers" now stands one step away from the title.

Chasing a modest 126 at the Bengal Cricket Academy ground, J&K rode on Samad's unbeaten 30 off 27 balls (3x6, 1x4) and rookie Vanshaj Sharma's composed 43 not out off 83 balls (4x4) as the pair stitched an unbroken 55-run stand for the fourth wicket to seal history on the fourth and penultimate day of the semifinal.

It's a dream come true today: BCCI Prez Mithun

Back in 2021, when current BCCI president Mithun Manhas became one of the administrators of a crisis-ridden Jammu and Kashmir Cricket Association (JKCA), he had to set things right in a body that was dealing with mismanagement and allegations of corruption. On Wednesday, when the Jammu and Kashmir team created history by reaching its first-ever Ranji Trophy final, Manhas could afford to be a bit emotional.



Smaran hits a hundred as Karnataka builds 802-run lead vs Uttarakhand

Ravichandran Smaran scored his second successive hundred as Karnataka continued to grind down Uttarakhand to reach 299 for six in their second innings for a whopping overall lead of 802 runs on the fourth day of the Ranji Trophy semifinal here on Wednesday.

Karnataka assured a berth in the title clash against Jammu and Kashmir, securing a 503-run first innings lead after bowling out Uttarakhand for 233 in their first innings in the opening session of the penultimate day. However, that massive lead notwithstanding, Karnataka did not enforce the follow-on and used the second innings to give further practice to their batters ahead of the final, starting from February 26.

Brief scores: Karnataka: 736 and 299/6 in 63.5 overs (R Smaran 127, KL Rahul 70 batting, Krurthik Krishna 52; Abhay Negi 2/53) vs Uttarakhand: 233 all out in 88.5 overs (Lakshya Raichandani 55, Aditya Rawat 45 not out; Vyshak Vijayakumar 3/45, Vidyadhar Patil 3/40).

Uttarakhand too slipped to 175 for nine, but Aditya Rawat made an unbeaten 45 off 38 balls to take his side past 200. —*PTI*

T20 SERIES AUSTRALIA

Pacers give India Women confidence

CANBERRA, 18 FEB

Aiming to establish an unassailable lead over Australia, Harmanpreet Kaur's India would draw confidence from a strong bowling performance in the rain-hit opening win when the two sides square off in the second and penultimate T20 International here on Thursday.

It was a commanding display from seamer Arundhati Reddy, whose four-wicket haul rattled the hosts and spearheaded a superb bowling effort as Australia were unable to bat out their 20 overs and were bundled out for a below-par 133. The bowlers enjoyed a solid workout as the long series, also featuring three ODIs and a one-off Test, unfolded. On the batting front, only openers Smriti Mandhana and Shafali Verma managed meaningful time in the middle as rain played spoilsport and the match was decided by the Duckworth-Lewis System, leaving the rest of the batting unit potentially a touch under-prepared.

Indian Women's dress rehearsal for the Thursday match –X/@BCCIWOMEN

Reddy's Winning Spell Powers India to Victory

Pacer Arundhati Reddy's four-wicket haul in India's win in the first women's T20I against Australia was a reflection of her preparedness, said bowling coach Aavishkar Salvi here on Wednesday.

Arundhati claimed 4/22 to help India bowl Australia out for a mere 133 and win the contest by 21 runs via DLS Method in Sydney to take a 1-0 lead in the three-match series.

Arundhati is a very hard-working girl. She comes prepared for any of the tournaments that she comes into, Salvi told reporters on the eve of the second T20I here. —*PTI*

Dembele exits in first half of PSG's win over Monaco

MONACO, 18 FEB

Paris Saint-Germain forward Ousmane Dembele's frustrating season continued when he came off with an apparent injury during the first half of the Champions League playoff against Monaco on Tuesday.

Desire Doue came on for Dembele, scored twice, and played a part in the other goal as PSG took a 3-2 lead into the return leg next Wednesday in Paris.

Dembélé was doubtful for the game due to a leg injury and was replaced in the 26th minute at Stade Louis II. The Ballon d'Or winner has been hampered by injuries this season.

Shortly before coming off, television images showed him twice rubbing the back of his left calf and then pulling his sock down. Coach Luis Enrique said he did not take any risks by starting Dembélé, who was PSG's top scorer last season with 35 goals. "We know what shape each player is in. No risk, he trained normally," Luis Enrique said. "We'll have to see if there's an injury. —*PTI*